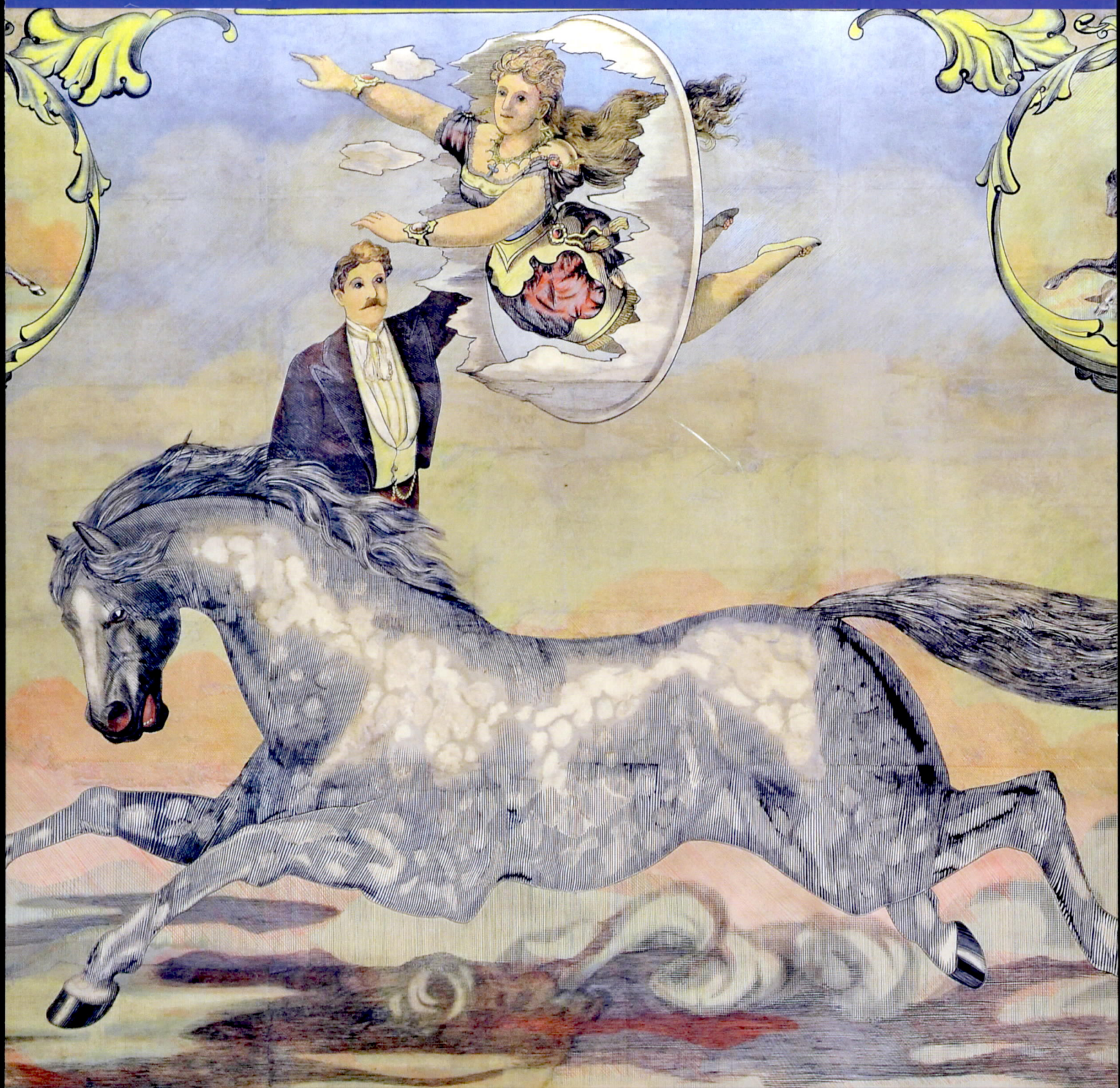


# Bandwagon

Vol. 60 No. 1 2016

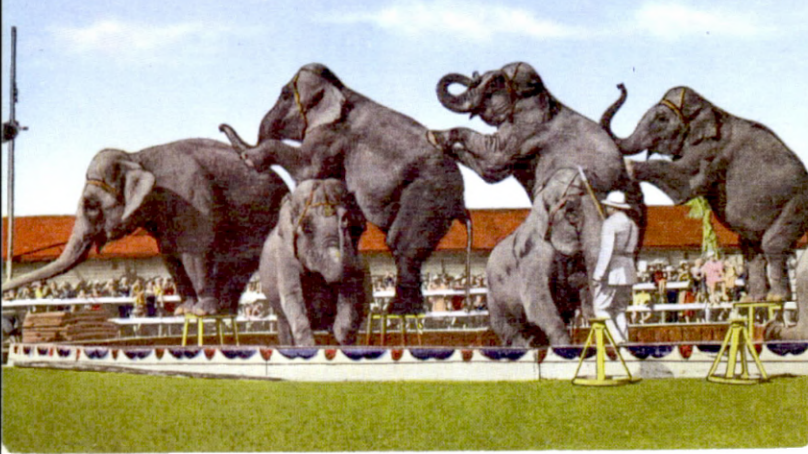


The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

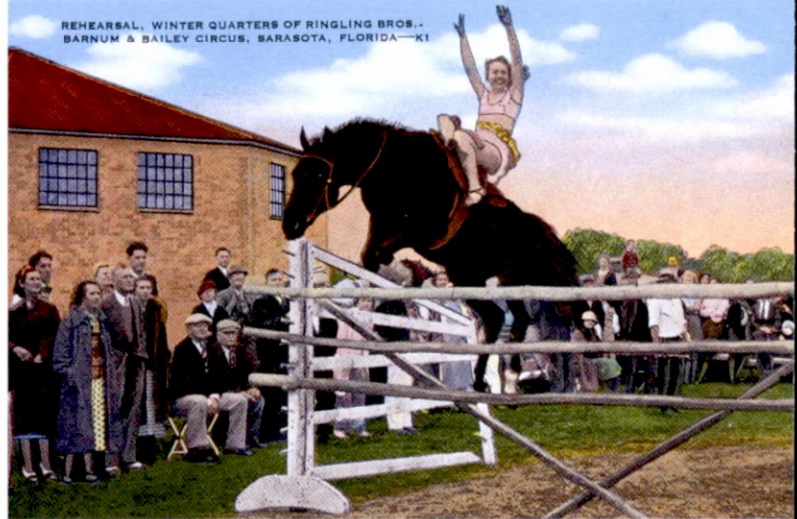


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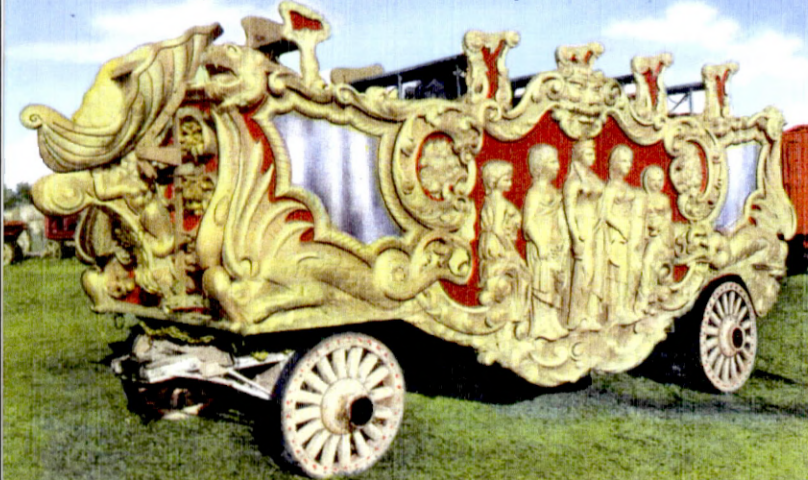
S-34 PERFORMING ELEPHANTS AT RINGLING BROS. & BARNUM & BAILEY WINTER QUARTERS, SARASOTA, FLORIDA



REHEARSAL, WINTER QUARTERS OF RINGLING BROS. & BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS, SARASOTA, FLORIDA—K1

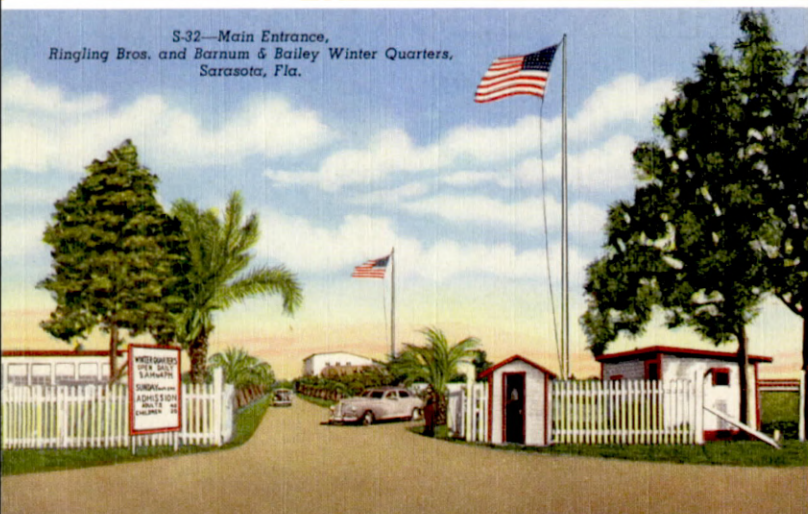


S-57—Circus Bandwagon, Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Winter Quarters, Sarasota, Florida



You won't want to miss this historic celebration of the importance of Sarasota in the evolution of the American circus. Enjoy in depth examinations of the fascinating mix of personalities, localities and sensibilities that created a unique show business community. Visit the Big Cat Habitat, The Circus Arts Conservatory, and meet members of the circus community at Sarasota's Showfolks Club. Explore the rich history of the circus at The Ringling Museum and enjoy performances at the Ringling International Arts Festival.

S-32—Main Entrance, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Winter Quarters, Sarasota, Fla.



S-39—At the Circus, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Winter Quarters, Sarasota, Fla.



**See you in Sarasota in October!**



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# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society  
2016 Volume 60, Number 1



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# Circus Historical Society

[circushistory.org](http://circushistory.org)

## Mission Statement

*"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."*

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## Notes from the Editor

Welcome to 2016, a year that will clearly be one for the pages of *Bandwagon* when all is said and done. The entire circus community is already well aware of the impending change to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's *Greatest Show on Earth*. The Ringling show without elephants will be a very different experience indeed. The loss of one tradition leads to the creation of something new. In the pages of this issue we look back to circus experiences of the past and hopefully, through those stories can see how the circus community has been in continuous evolution since its earliest days – growing, minimizing certain acts and developing new ones to excite the audiences of the day.

In this issue two articles explore the memories of showmen of days past. Charles A. Schramm was a cornet player with circuses, minstrel shows, and civic groups at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He recorded his experiences in a nicely written memoir brought to my attention by Fred Pfening III. Additionally, we have a reminiscence from impresario Walter L. Main, reflecting on the elephants and other animals which had been popular features with his show. For that article, I owe thanks to Fred Dahlinger, Jr. who forwarded it to me for *Bandwagon*. Bob Cline, a CHS Trustee, has documented the elephants that toured with the Mills Bros. Circus of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – an interesting look at how important elephants were to American circuses and at how the animals moved between shows. Another performer who was once crucial to the success of any circus in America was the bareback rider. Dan Draper has continued his efforts to document the histories of the talented equestrians who awed audiences with his study on the careers of early rider Charles Reed and his family. And finally, Paul Ingrassia has shared a history, as well as a few of his own personal memories, of the phenomenal Chappie Fox.

As always, many people were critical to producing our publication. Along with those listed above, thanks are due to John and Mardi Wells for once again designing a wonderful looking issue.

JLP



## On the Covers

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

The front and back covers feature a poster printed by Courier Company for P. T. Barnum's New and Greatest Show on Earth of 1877 which was a traveling museum, menagerie and circus. The poster was restored after being found on an obscured wall inside a home in Canada. It is now part of the Tibbals Collection at The Ringling Museum.

Although little information can be found on the featured star, equestrienne Jennie Watson, the following excerpt from the April 21, 1877 *New York Clipper* gives a sense of the excitement of the performance of Barnum's great show:

P. T. Barnum's Show began a season in Gilmore's Garden April 9. This spacious edifice was divided in the centre by an arched drapery of red, white and blue cloth, and in that portion nearest Madison avenue the arena and tiers of comfortable seats had been constructed. In the other portion the cages containing the animals and the museum curiosities, the camels and elephants, were placed so as to afford the spectators ample opportunity to view them. At two o'clock and eight o'clock P.M. daily, circus performances began in the arena with a pageant which included ladies and gentlemen clad in gorgeous costumes and mounted upon gayly caparisoned steeds, elephants with rich housings, camels, ponies, mules, etc. After this, the living curiosities, including Capt. Georges Costentenus, the tattooed Albanian Greek, and Admiral Dot were introduced to the spectators' notice. Charles Reed, a skillful rider, was seen in a principal somersault act, during which Ben Maginley, attired as a jester, evoked much laughter by his refined witticisms, jokes and odd sayings, being efficiently aided by Frank Whittaker the ringmaster; the Miaco Brothers gave a comical acrobatic act; McMahon, attired as a Comanche Indian, exemplified many intrepid feats of horsemanship peculiar to that tribe, and during his act one of the Miaco Brothers officiated as clown; the Leotards excited admiration by the skill and grace displayed in their classical groupings; William Aymar illustrated that old-time act called "A Countryman's Visit to the Circus;" Satsuma and

Little All-right performed feats of heavy balancing, which were followed by a tumbling act by the principal members of the company; Miss Jennie Watson rode a principal act, which met with much favor; John LeClair gave feats of hat-spinning and juggling. The first real novelty of the show was a tandem manège act by Jennie Louise Hengler, who made her American debut. Her two Pommeranian horses were remarkable for their beauty and symmetry of form, and she, by the skill she displayed in directing their movements, proved herself an equestrienne of the highest rank. Satsuma and Little All-right gave further evidence of their equilibristic skill, and then Charles W. Fish gave an exhibition of grace and daring while riding a principal and trick act, during which he turned several backward and forward somersaults over banners and through balloons while his horse was coursing the circle. A fresh horse having been brought into the arena, Mr. Fish concluded with an exhibition of rapid bareback riding. His performances throughout were frequently applauded, and after their conclusion he was several times recalled. Ted Almonte acted as clown during this act. The second novelty consisted of the performances of six Trakene horses, introduced by Mons. Oscar. All save one – which had white spots on the hoofs of its forelegs – were entirely jet-black, of remarkable fine proportions, and of the same size. Their performances were of the class hitherto performed in this country by a single trained horse. All worked in concert, and with as much precision as a company of well-drilled soldiers executing the manual of arms. They were under the perfect control of Mons. Oscar who directed their movements by motions of his whip. Their various tricks elicited fervid applause, and they may be pronounced to be not only an absolute novelty, but a very strong attraction. In response to a second recall, Mons. Oscar introduced a single horse, who performed the remarkable feats of rapidly running around the ring, using his fore-legs upon a raised platform inside the ring, and his hind legs upon the earth. Feats by performing elephants concluded the circus performances, and half an hour of time was allowed the visitors to inspect the museum and menagerie. The attendance was large, standing room even being at a premium.



# THE MILLS BROS. CIRCUS ELEPHANTS

*by Robert Cline*



**T**he Mills Bros. Circus was a touring truck show from 1940 to 1966. Their modest beginnings in the circus business came with the purchase of some equipment from the defunct Richard Bros. Circus and a season opener in Tallulah, Louisiana on April 20, 1940.<sup>1</sup> Harry, Jake, and Jack Mills were about to embark on a circus journey that would span a quarter of a century. Jack had been a banner man in the business with 25 years on the circus trail under his belt. Harry had the candy stands on the Cole Bros. Circus for the last three years. Jake Mills had been leading the band on the Parker and Watts Circus the previous year.

Their first year in business featured the performing elephant Maxine. Maxine had been on the Parker and Watts Circus the previous two years. She was owned by W. C. Richards and leased to the Mills Bros. Circus. In early August of 1940, Maxine was suffering from a toothache and did not appear in several towns according to circus representatives. In actuality, Maxine had been attached through legal channels. Mrs. W. C. Richards of Pensacola, Florida had not received her lease payments totaling almost \$135 from the Mills Bros. Circus and took possession back of her elephant.<sup>2</sup> Maxine was





Above, the Mills Bros. Circus lot in Cooperstown, New York, circa 1953, photographed by Jim Hoyer.

The Ringling Museum, Sabia Collection

Right, the elephants Mitzie, Fritzie and Ziggy performed with Singer's Midgits.

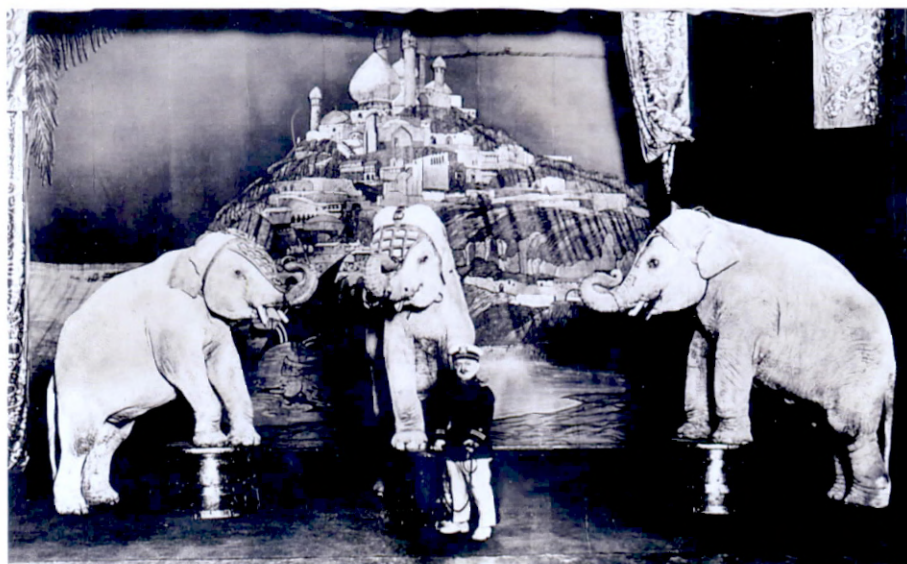
Buckles Blog

being presented by Miss Myrtle under the direction of one of the Richards family members according to Mr. Fred Pfening's information from *The Billboard*. Maxine was with the Jay Gould Million Dollar Circus in February of 1941 in Pensacola when she passed away unexpectedly.

The hardships of the Great Depression had taken their toll on the circus industry, most notably forcing the early season closing of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, Inc. in 1938. Among the shows struggling to beat the effects of the depression, the Haag Bros. Circus was forced to fold in 1940. This show, first toured in 1937, was owned by Henry and Roy Haag, nephews of Ernest Haag, owner of the Mighty Haag Circus. Although the Haag brothers were savvy enough to make it through the years that other shows folded, their luck finally ran out. Their closing and the subsequent auction on September 7, 1940 in Abingdon, Virginia of equipment and animals, brought forth the first two elephants the Mills Bros. show would own. The Haag Bros. Circus auction inventory listed a male elephant, 19 years of age and 3,000 pounds. A female elephant, 20 years old and 5,000 pounds, was also listed.<sup>3</sup>

According to a news article in the *Zanesville Signal* on May 11, 1942 from Zanesville, Ohio, these elephants, along with a third, were brought to America by Frank Buck for Flo Ziegfeld along with various other exotic animals. The third elephant, a male, was named Ziggy after the famous owner of the Follies. Next, the three elephants were sold to a vaudeville group, Singer's Midgits, which also played some circus dates.<sup>4</sup> The elephants were teenagers by the time Singer's Midgits sold Ziggy to the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago and then sold Mitzi, the female, and Fritz (or Fritzie), the male, to the Haag Bros. Circus. The Haag Bros. Circus paid \$4,000 for the two of them.

The Mills Bros. Circus closed on September 12, 1940, five days after the Haag auction, in New London, Ohio and moved to Berea, Ohio for the winter.<sup>5</sup> While no documentation has been located to suggest that the elephants appeared in the last four days of the season on the Mills show, for the sake of the author's own elephant records, they are listed as being part of the Mills show in 1940. Rather than let them stand around all winter and be bored, the Haag



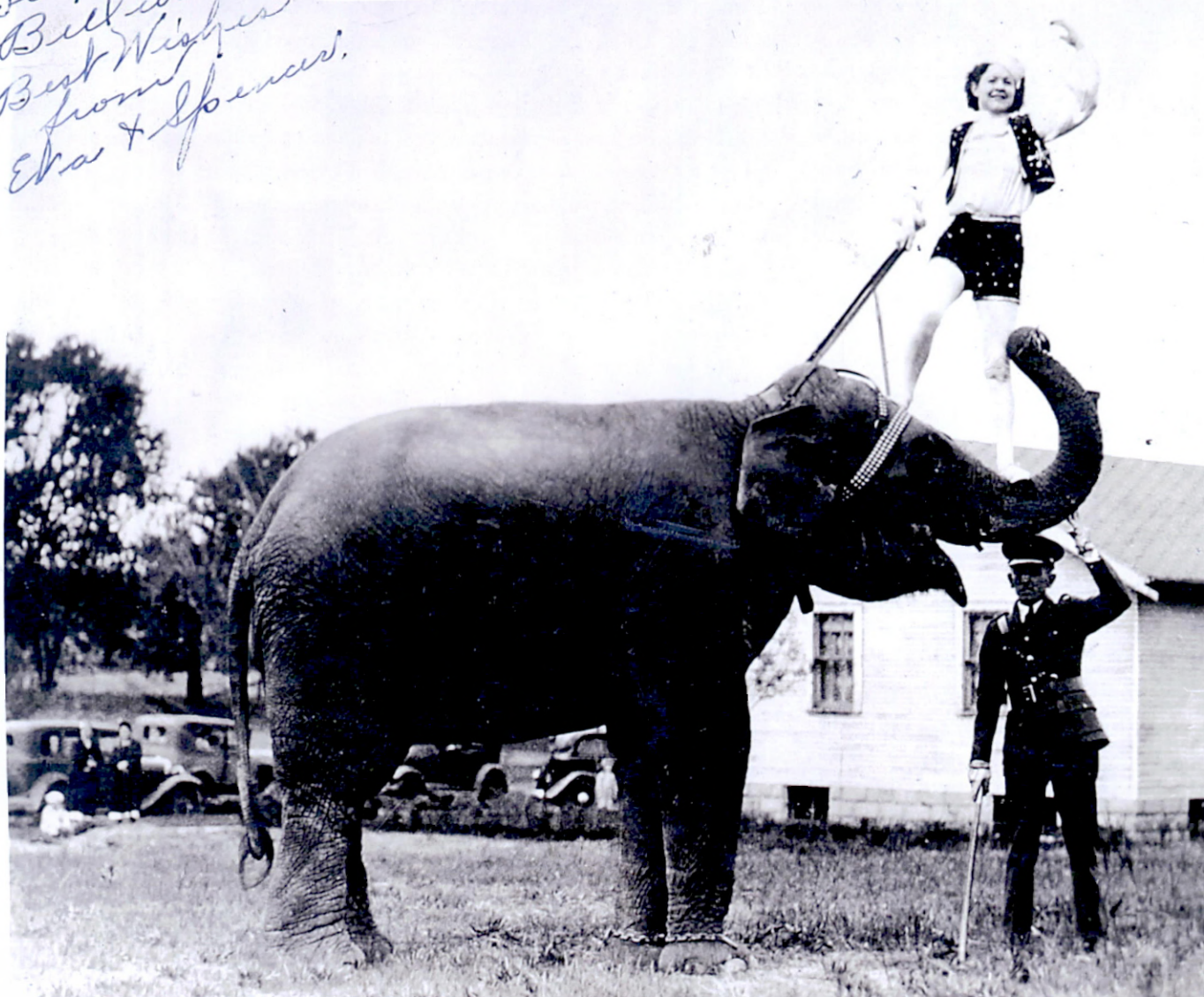


enterprise put the elephants to work at a log mill over the winter steadily moving logs from here to there.<sup>6</sup> The pair also performed at winter dates including the Hamid-Morton Cleveland spot under Mills ownership.

Although the Mills Bros. Circus had its first winter quarters in Canton, Ohio it had been moved to Berea, Ohio where they had larger buildings to work in and more room to spread out. The elephants had plenty of room to move about the fairgrounds and had a new coal stove in their barn to keep them warm. Unfortunately for the Mills Bros. Circus, Mitzie never had the opportunity to perform with the show. She died in February of 1941 while the show was still in winter quarters. That left Fritzie as their sole elephant.

According to well-known animal trainer and circus historian John Herriott, a gentleman nicknamed "Heavy" had been with these elephants since the Haag show. To date no documentation for the elephant man in 1941 has been located, but the 1942 Mills Bros. route book lists a Fred Holloway as working with the elephants. Mr. Herriott felt the name sounded familiar. Being their prize possession at that point in time, the circus PR machine took over and Fritzie was soon billed as "Goliath, the largest living and breathing mammal in the world, weighing five tons and standing twelve feet tall, a full four inches taller than the legendary Jumbo."<sup>7 & 8</sup> This line of advertising was used through the 1941 and 1942 seasons. These majestic claims were somewhat undermined by a photo in the *Times Recorder* in

*To Bill with  
Best Wishes  
from  
Eva & Spencer.*



Spencer and Eva Huntley with Burma, circa 1943

Buckles Blog



Zanesville, Ohio dated May 2, 1942, which showed Goliath with his presenter Miss Jean Cornell, who clearly stood more than half of the animal's height.

Mr. Herriott also recalled Jack Mills ballying Fritz as a cigarette smoking elephant. A long reed was used with a lit cigarette at one end. The reed was given to Fritz who thus was able to produce smoke. By the end of the 1942 season, Fritzie was a serious handful of mischief. By way of Brownsville, Texas animal dealer, W. A. "Snake" King, Fritzie was sold to the Mexico City Zoo in 1943.<sup>9</sup>

The Mills show needed another elephant. A relatively young elephant was located for sale after the 1942 season ended.<sup>10</sup> She was only 22 years old and had been around the circus world all her life. As a punk she was brought to America in 1921 by Louis Ruhe, a noted animal dealer of the time. The calf, Virginia, first stopped at the William P. Hall farm before becoming a member of the Sells-Floto Circus menagerie in 1922. She was so small that she was actually exhibited in a cage. Virginia spent the next seven years with the Sells-Floto show, transferring to the Coleman Circus in 1929. Next, she toured with Gordon Bros. Circus in 1930 and Robbins Bros. in 1931. The following two years, 1932 and 1933, saw Virginia housed at the William P. Hall farm. In 1934 she toured with Russell Bros. Circus and then joined the Atterbury Bros. Circus in 1935. On this last show, the elephant proved more difficult than ever before.

On June 7, 1935 while the Atterbury show was in Crookston, Minnesota, just after exiting the big top from her performance, the elephant was spooked and turned to run back into the tent, smashing directly through the bleachers. In the mad scramble of people trying to get out of the way, many were injured and a nine year old child was killed.<sup>11</sup> Virginia's trainer at the time was William Woodcock, Sr.<sup>12</sup>

Woodcock worked with another trainer from the William P. Hall farm, Spencer Huntley, to transport Virginia during those years. The two of them eventually bought the elephant and changed her name to Burma. After the season with Atterbury, they took Burma to the Bailey Bros. Circus, staying on when the show became Goldman Bros. Eventually, Woodcock left Virginia/Burma in the complete ownership of Huntley, who sold his elephant to the Mills Bros. Circus during the winter of 1942-43.

With the acquisition of Burma, the Mills brothers had a great work elephant and a wonderful performer all in one. She was presented in the ring by various ladies over the years, including La Celeste in 1945, performing the Hu-



*A showgirl rides one of the Mills elephants in 1948.*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

man Pendulum routine that "Cheerful" Gardner had done so many years before them. In 1946, Rose Dohnal was her presenter. Since the Mills show had successfully advertised their former elephant Fritzie as the largest elephant in captivity at 12 feet tall and weighing five tons, they evolved their pitch to fit their new attraction, now featuring Burma as the largest elephant in captivity.<sup>13</sup>

Burma became a mainstay for the show, remaining with it for 24 years – right up to the closing of the Mills



*This image of Burma exiting the big top in 1947 is included in circus fan C. E. Elwell's scrapbook for the season.*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection





*The Mills Bros. backyard, 1948*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Bros. Circus in 1966. She delighted audiences, young and old alike, but she was known to give trainers fits over the years as well. As reported in the April 24, 1946 newspapers, Burma demonstrated her own version of spring fever when she got free and dragged her broken leg chain around Marion, Ohio. She enjoyed herself for over an hour, tearing down fences and clotheslines along the way. Trainer Roy Howser thought a bale of hay would slow her down long enough to get another leg chain on her, but Burma having none of it, broke the next chain and kept on going. Finally an exasperated Howser and a crew of circus people cornered her with a truck and returned her to the circus lot.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar incident, on June 3, 1947, Burma took the pleasure of her own personal tour of Lansing, Michigan when she escaped from the big top into the gardens and parks of the south side of town. She was found by police and recaptured by circus employees as she got tangled in a clothesline – still dragging the chain she had broken.<sup>15</sup> Burma also enjoyed holiday traditions as well as anyone else. Just to make sure she was first in line at the annual Thanksgiving celebration, she snapped her chain in the Circleville, Ohio winter quarters on Nov. 19, 1949 and shuffled quietly past thirty sleeping employees to the commissary area where she enjoyed 100 pounds of potatoes, 25 pounds of onions, 20 loaves of bread, 10 pounds of pancake flour, 8 candy bars, and a box of shredded wheat. Her trainer was Mark Roe at the time and he was able to stop her as she was breaking open the can of tobacco.<sup>16</sup>

The 1948 season opened in Circleville, Ohio on April 17<sup>th</sup> with Burma, the only elephant on the show, being presented by Frank and Virginia Noel. The *Asian Elephant Studbook* refers to an elephant named Lillian as being on

the Mills show in 1948 and then going to the zoo in Atlanta. It is an incomplete listing and unverified at this time. The Chang Reynolds files do not indicate any elephant named Lillian on any circus. Upon conferring with renowned animal historian Richard Reynolds III, who calls Atlanta home, there was never an elephant named Lillian at the zoo in Atlanta in 1948 or any other year. I mention this elephant only if someone else would see the same listing and wonder why she wasn't mentioned in this article.

By 1948 Virginia Noel was performing the head-carry. The advertising for 1949 and 1950 announces Virginia Noel as Burma's human pendulum, but the records show that Frank Noel had left in 1949 and returned in 1950. Snippets in the 1949 *Billboard* indicated that the season began with Spencer Huntley presenting Burma, with his wife, Helen, performing the head carry.<sup>17</sup> The Huntleys left the show in early July and Virginia Mann appears to have taken the place for the head-carry routine.<sup>18</sup> Spencer Huntley died of heart disease later that month.<sup>19</sup>

The 1950 season started out with a considerable change to the Mills Bros. elephant department. In March, two elephants made their way from Sarasota to Circleville, Ohio to augment the Mills herd.<sup>20</sup> Both Wallace Jennie and Barnes Trilby were purchased from the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey show. Ringling records indicate the pair was purchased for \$6,500.<sup>21</sup> Wallace Jennie had been imported in 1921 from Italy. She was on the John Robinson show with "Cheerful" Gardner in 1923 and 1924, then went to the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus when the herds were switched in 1925. She remained there until 1938 when she was moved to the Al G. Barnes winter quarters in California. When the Ringling show came through on September 15, 1939, Walter McClain added her to the Ringling herd. Wallace Jenny remained on the Ringling show until being sold to



*Watering Mills elephants, circa 1950*

Buckles Blog



the Mills Bros. Circus. She would remain with Mills, along with Burma, until the show closed in 1966.

Trilby is also referred to as Barnes Trilby because there were several Trilbys on shows at the same time. She first performed at Thompson and Dundee's Luna Park before moving to the Otto Floto Dog & Pony Show in 1905. From 1906 through 1932 Trilby was part of the Sells-Floto herd. She next spent three years on the Al. G. Barnes show and then, from 1937 to 1938, she was listed with the Al G. Barnes & Sells-Floto title. In 1938 she joined the Ringling herd. Interestingly, Richard Reynolds III was able to find in the Ringling records a note that said Trilby was on a must sell list when the corporation shows elephants and Ringling elephants all started to come together. Nevertheless, she remained on the Ringling show until being sold to the Mills Bros. Circus in 1950.

Shortly after the Ringling elephants arrived, in March of 1950, a fire broke out on the fairgrounds. The three elephants panicked and all broke their chains and dashed to safety and freedom. They were all safe and enjoyed a romping good time when they were found several hours later near a creek about a mile away from the Circleville, Ohio fairgrounds.<sup>22</sup>

Once the show started the season, they faced other problems with the elephants. Trilby suffered from a massive infection, linked to a rotten tooth. In May, the tooth was pulled and Trilby was treated with penicillin, leading to a feature story and photograph in the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>23</sup> The newsworthy treatment was not, sadly, enough to save the elephant. Trilby took ill and died on June 1, 1950 in Davenport, Iowa. Her body was given to the Palmer Chiropractic Institute for further skeletal study.

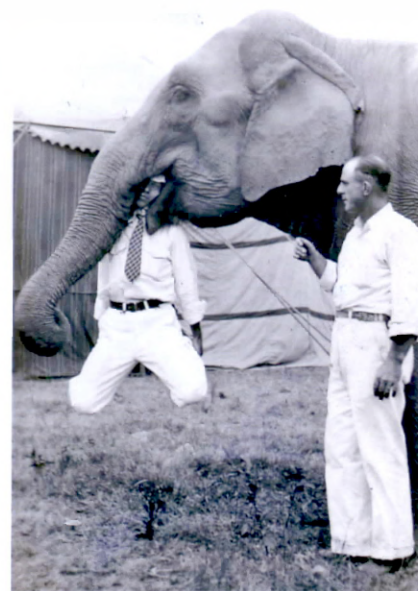
The Mills Bros. Circus was able to purchase four el-

ephants from Mrs. L. J. Polack near the end of the 1950 season. They had been on the Polack Circus eastern unit. On November 22, 1950 the arrival of Lena, Bunte (or Bunny), Indi, and Jenny brought the Mills Bros. Circus elephant herd up to six elephants. Jenny and Lena were part of the famed Powers elephant act and were world travelers in their own rights. Jenny's name was promptly changed to Dixie since the Mills show already had one Jennie.

The 1951 season had a new elephant superintendent in place by the name of Alonzo Dever when they opened in Columbus, Ohio on April 14<sup>th</sup>. He was a very experienced man around elephants having spent years around them on the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, the Clyde Beatty Circus, and the previous season, on Cole & Walters. Just as the 1951 season was getting under way, Alonzo Dever suffered a fatal heart attack as he exited the big top, having just finished his performance on May 3, 1951 in Greenville, Ohio.<sup>24</sup>

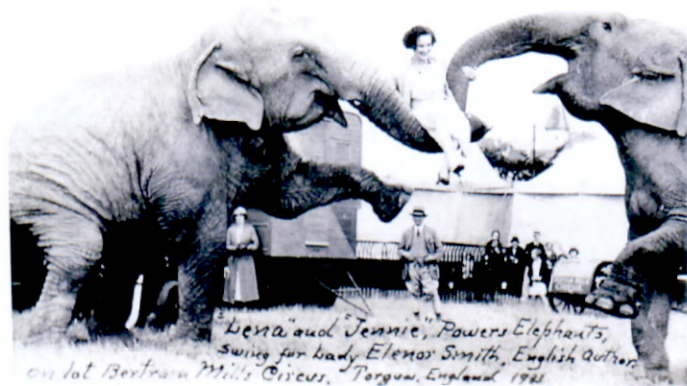
In July of 1950, Virgil (Kentucky) Sagrares was in charge of the bulls while Virginia Mann, who had been performing the head carry act with Burma under Dever's supervision, continued her routine.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the 1951 Route book says Alonzo Dever was succeeded by Virgil Sagrares as Elephant and Menagerie Supt. It does mention under the Menagerie and Side Show crew that Mr. Dever is deceased.

Less than two weeks after Dever's death, the Mills Bros. show announced the purchase of two additional elephants. Two more elephants were added from the Ringling show in 1951. Lelabardi and Minnie were also seasoned veterans. Lelabardi came to the United States in 1950 with the Baptiste Schreiber act when he joined the Ringling show with another elephant named Manula. They completed the 1950 season on the Ringling show doing a teeterboard routine



Alonzo Dever (at right) with unidentified elephant

Buckles Blog



Elephants Lena and Jennie toured England with Bertram Mills before being sold to the Mills Bros. in 1950.

Buckles Blog





*Baptiste Schreiber with Manula and Lelabardi, circa 1950*

Buckles Blog



*A 1951 photograph of one of the Mills Bros. Circus' elephant trucks*

Buckles Blog



*The Mills elephants, led by Burma at right, circa 1953.*

Buckles Blog

with Baptiste Schreiber as the leaper and the elephants doing the vaulting and catching. Ringling extended their season over the winter months by playing some dates in Cuba. After their return from Cuba, Manula dropped over dead at the Sarasota Winter Quarters. No longer part of an act, Lelabardi was sold to the Mills Bros. Although accounts claimed that Schreiber would take over the Mills herd, that does not seem to have occurred.<sup>26</sup>

The elephant, Minnie, arrived in America in 1923 going to the Ringling show. She stayed in the Bridgeport, Connecticut winter quarters in 1924, 1925 and 1926 before joining the Ringling herd from 1927 to 1934. The 1935 to 1936 years saw her over on the Al G. Barnes Circus and the Al G. Barnes/Sells-Floto Circus in 1937 and 1938. When the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus closed its season early in June of 1938, they sent several of their key attractions out to join the Al G. Barnes/Sells-Floto Circus – the only show still on the road under the corporation title that Ringling owned. They finished out the season, then all of the animals and equipment returned to Sarasota winter quarters. Thus Minnie came to the Ringling herd in 1939 and remained through 1950 when Ringling sold her to the Mills Bros. Circus.

The Mills Bros. Circus performing herd of elephants now numbered eight in all, a new record for the show and what would turn out to be the highest number ever. Six of the eight elephants traveled in the same truck. At a stop in Ionia, Michigan, the elephant truck was deemed to be over the weight limit. One of the elephants had to be unloaded to make the legal weight and the show had to pay a penny a pound penalty or \$ 41.50. The show then had to send a truck back to pick her up later.<sup>27</sup>

After the show closed the 1951 season, the rumor mills were running rampant. The February 9, 1952 edition of *Billboard* announced the addition of veteran elephant trainer Hugo Schmitt to the roster while Virgil Sagraves remained Herd Boss.<sup>28</sup> Having butted heads with the Ringling management about his training and duties, the incomparable Hugo Schmitt had found himself looking for a new position working elephants. He was able to bring the Mills Show some of the Hagenbeck school of training and quality along with the absolute control that any great elephant trainer requires.

Still looking for ways to grow their show, in 1953 the Mills were carefully gauging the futures of some of their competitors. The Cole Bros. Circus under the ownership of Arthur Wirtz was reportedly finished by 1953. At stake was the entire show's inventory including 13 elephants, hoof



stock, wagons, equipment and the Cole title. The train and the winter quarters were not part of the deal. Jack Mills was eagerly looking the matter over.<sup>29</sup> Somewhere in the discussion process, Jack Mills turned away from the Cole show herd. The May 2, 1953 issue of *Billboard* reported that Jack Mills and Bill Horstman of the Cole Bros. Circus had met a couple times recently in Cincinnati and at the Greenville opening, but never could agree upon a price. By December of 1953, both parties were in agreement about most everything but could never conclude on an arrangement for the Chicago arena dates that Arthur Wirtz controlled. What could have been one of the great circus coups of modern times, never materialized.

Despite the failure to strike such a major deal, the 1953 season was another action packed year for the Mills Bros. show. The presidential elections in the previous fall had brought Dwight D. Eisenhower into office. His Inaugural Parade on January 20<sup>th</sup> would have Ohio representation in the form of the official Republican mascot, the elephant. Ohio's best known elephants were Burma and her friends.

They were perfect ladies and the press loved them. Coming from their winter quarters in Greenville, Ohio at the Darke County Fairgrounds, they took Washington D.C. by storm and Washington loved every minute of it.<sup>30</sup> Many Republican parades that followed over the years included Burma and her friends.

With the season underway, the Mills Bros. elephants were prime subjects for advance press. The June 13, 1953 edition of *Billboard* told how Burma was used to rescue a trapped driver when a truck flipped over on a car in Baltimore, Maryland. Burma pulled the truck off of the car which was enough to free the trapped driver. Burma was formally given an award plaque in the big top that evening. The press carried Burma and the Mills route for several days afterwards. A few weeks later, a sadder incident made the press. The elephant, India, died unexpectedly on June 29, 1953 while the show was in Wallingford, Connecticut – reducing the herd to seven elephants.<sup>31</sup> Near the end of October, newspapers reported that the Mills Show had experienced another wandering elephant in the middle of the



Jim Hoyer took this photo of Hugo Schmitt and the Mills Bros. elephants in Fairfield, Connecticut, 1953.

The Ringling Museum, Sabia Collection



night while in Prichard, Alabama on October 31<sup>st</sup>.<sup>32</sup>

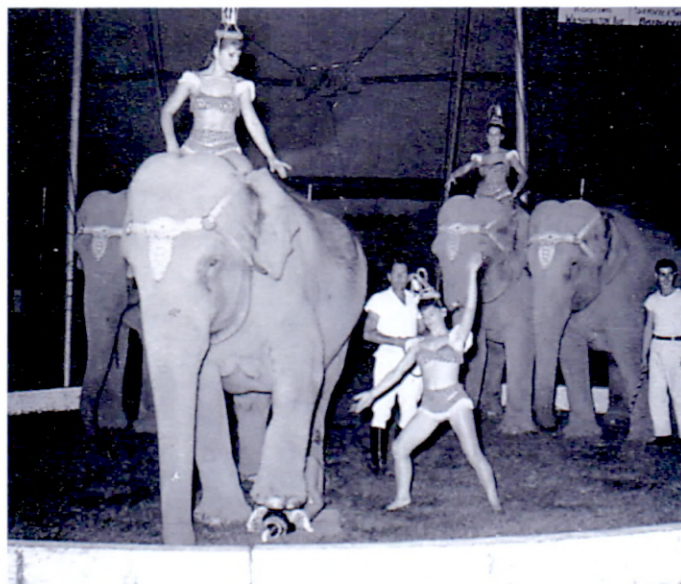
Interestingly, we know a little more about the 1953 performances of the Mills Bros. Circus thanks to Charles Bennett, Jr.'s contribution in the February/March 1971 issue of the Circus Model Builder's periodical the *Little Circus Wagon*. The terrific article is about the bands of Mills Bros. Circus. Included in it were the musical selections for the 1953 season. Hugo Schmitt's elephant act worked to the sounds of the *Entry of the Gladiators*, *Sounds from the Harem*, *Merry-Go-Round*, *Hindustan*, *Student Prince*, *Black Bottom*, and *The Royal Decree*.

The 1953 season ended with the departure of Hugo Schmitt, who had returned to Ringling. The next change came when in the January 30, 1954 edition of *Billboard*, the Mills Bros. Circus offered the elephant Minnie for sale for \$2,500. Minnie, who was blind in one eye, was eventually sold to a private owner by the name of Ben Fain in Van Buren, Arkansas. Then, from 1956 to 1972 she was at the Tulsa Zoo. Next, she was privately owned by Dale Hampton in Riverside, California until she finally returned to the circus business in 1974. She was on Circus Vargas until 1978, when she was retired to a facility in California where she died in July of 1978.

Also during the winter months of 1954, the former Powers elephant named Jenny, the one that the Mills show renamed Dixie, was sold to the Hagen Bros. Circus. She remained with the Hagen Bros. Circus until her death in winter quarters during the winter in January of 1957.

With the Mills Bros. show now down to five elephants, a veteran elephant hand by the name of Virgil (Kentucky) Sagraves was promoted to head up the elephant department. He would remain the herd boss until he left the show in 1962.

When the Mills Bros. Circus played Girard, Pennsylvania – the home of legendary showman Dan Rice – on July 30, 1954, they had a unique opportunity to gar-



Virgil and Rita Sagraves present the elephants, circa 1956.

Buckles Blog



The Mills elephants, 1954

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection





*A 1958 performance presented by the Sagraves.*

Buckles Blog

ner publicity and honor an important figure in circus history. At a formal ceremony in the middle of the day, the mayor and other town dignitaries offered words of praise for Rice. Burma then placed a wreath at a Civil War monument that Dan Rice himself had erected. It was reported to be the first Civil War monument ever erected in the United States.<sup>33</sup>

In 1955, Mills Bros. lost another elephant when Lena

was sold to Donald L. Baecher of Mayville, NY. He was a tropical fish shop owner who always wanted to own an elephant. Lena was blind in one eye and losing a lot of weight. With generous care and community involvement, Lena started gaining some weight back and became the huge attraction that one would expect. Unfortunately, when winter started to set in, Lena pulled the plumbing down one night flooding the area where she was standing. She contracted pneumonia and succumbed a couple days later.<sup>34</sup>

Down to only four elephants in their herd, the Mills show started looking for elephants again. They found one on the King Bros. Circus. Imported in 1954 by the Atlantic Fertilizer Co. and sold to the Ringling show, she was dropped while being unloaded which broke her shoulder. With a broken shoulder, she accomplished little more than to pull a float over the years. She had been sold to King Bros. Circus in 1955 and when that show finally folded for good in 1956, the Mills Bros. Circus bought the elephant. Sometimes billed as a dwarf elephant, she was named Una, after Kentucky Sagraves' daughter, Una Jean.

With the acquisition of Una Jean, the Mills Bros. Circus started the 1957 season with five elephants. These same elephants – along with Virgil Sagraves, their trainer – remained constant throughout the close of the 1960 sea-



*Richard Cline photographed the young Una pulling one of the spec floats in 1962.*

Robert Cline Collection





*The Mills elephants, circa 1963*

Buckles Blog

son. According to *The Billboard* Una had come from R. E. McAfee of Macon, Georgia.<sup>35</sup> The article goes on to say Mr. McAfee had been associated with the King Bros. Circus. The young elephant was called Little Miss Burma in *The Billboard* article, a difference that reflected the name used for publicity versus the animal's given name. Una remained with the Mills Bros. Circus through the 1964 season when she was sold to Kissell Amusements in Indiana.<sup>36</sup>

At the beginning of the 1961 season, a decision was made to purchase another elephant. This time the direction of acquisition was changed to the purchase of a baby elephant rather than a seasoned veteran. With this philosophy in place, the Mills Bros. Circus took possession of an infant female Asian elephant they named Suzie in March of 1961. Their purchase however turned out to be a sick elephant that never improved. She died on the third day of the 1961 season, April 25<sup>th</sup>, in Lowellville, Ohio.<sup>37</sup>

The disappointment of this terrible loss didn't stop the Mills Bros. Circus from seeing the vision of a baby elephant on their show. They again made arrangements for a baby elephant to be purchased and took arrival of their new elephant this time in April of 1962. This infant seemed to be doing very well and was getting accustomed to the circus routine rather quickly. By the end of May, the Mills Bros. tour had landed them in the Chicago, Illinois area. Here with an abundance of spring time growth and enough

moisture, the green clover was growing very well. It was growing so well that after eating this fresh delight for two days, the new infant, also named Susie, had now become deathly ill. She died very quickly on May 30, 1962 near Chicago. The show closed their season again with Virgil Sagraves overseeing the same five elephants they had owned since 1957.

Hardship and unfortunate events are simply part of the life of the circus and the Mills Bros. Circus certainly had its share. The long trip home from the 1962 season end in Evansville, Indiana had a right front tire blow on the elephant truck be-

ing driven by Everett Lee Keener. He was able to pull Harold Pediar out of the wrecked truck to safety and then get the doors open on the overturned truck to get Burma and Lelabardi free as well. Unfortunately, the truck was then consumed in fire. The show lost about eighty costumes and two very highly prized chimpanzees in the accident.<sup>38</sup>

Virgil Sagraves stayed with the Mills show for the 1963



*The Mills elephants, circa 1952*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



and 1964 seasons.<sup>39</sup> With the previously mentioned sale of Una during the 1964 season, the show was now down to four elephants. Over the 1963/1964 winter, the Mills show again went looking for a young elephant to appease the masses with. This time another female Asian was located with a little more age to her than the two punks named Susie. She was affectionately named Little Miss Burma. She was sold to a private zoo at the close of the 1964 season. I have not been able to locate any information about where she came from and where she went after the Mills show. In a *White Tops* article by John Boyle in the May/June 1965 issue, Mr. Boyle commented that now Little Miss Burma could rest her crippled leg.<sup>40</sup>

The *Little Circus Wagon* carried Part Two of Charles Bennett, Jr.'s article about the Mills Bros. Circus band in the April/May 1971 issue. In this article he reported the music for 1964, 1965, and the final season of 1966 was the same for the bull act – starting with the *Entry of the Gladiators*, *Robinson's Grand Entry*, *Merry-Go-Round*, *Bravura*, *Quality Plus*, *Fanfare*, *E. Pluribus Unum*, *Abdullah*, and *Colossus of Columbia*.

Harry Dodge took over the bulls on the show in 1965. Once again a young punk elephant was purchased and named Sophronia.<sup>41</sup> Buckles Woodcock and the Chang Reynolds files both confirm her being there. What cannot be confirmed is where she came from, when she arrived, and when she died although it is certain she didn't last long in 1965. The remaining four elephants the Mills Bros. Circus still owned were Lelabardi, Wallace Jennie, Burma and Bunte (Bunnie).

The 1966 season would be the final tour for the Mills Bros. Circus. One of the few press worthy events of the season was a truck wreck on May 3, 1966 in Ashland, Ohio which resulted in a couple of broken doors on the one elephant truck and a two inch gash on Burma's trunk.<sup>42</sup> The season ended rather uneventfully in North Hills, Pennsylvania on Sept. 17, 1966. The following 100 mile jump back to the Jefferson, Ohio winter quarters was the last of the Mills Bros. Circus on the road.<sup>43</sup> With the deci-

sion to give up the business finally made, all four remaining elephants were sold to the Gran Circo Union in Mexico. While Buckles Woodcock was in Mexico in 1973, he happened to see Burma to know she was still alive at the time.<sup>44</sup>

The Mills Bros. Circus survived 27 seasons on the road, carrying at least one elephant with them at all times. There were a total of 18 different elephants over the years with the Mills show owning all but Maxine the first year. Seven of the bulls died while on the show. Six were sold to various buyers. The four that remained until the end all went to Mexico. **Bw**



Jake, Jack, and Harry Mills, circa 1952

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



## Endnotes

1. *The White Tops*, Dec. 1940/ Jan. 1941, p. 11.
2. *The Press Gazette* (Hillsboro, OH), August 6, 1940.
3. *Bandwagon*, Sept. / Oct. 1958, p. 9.
4. George "Slim" Lewis and Byron Fish, *I Loved Rogues*, p. 73.
5. CHS Message Board - Question # 695
6. Information provided by Darren Bryan.
7. *The Clearfield Progress* (Clearfield, PA), May 26, 1941.
8. *The Edwardsville Intelligencer*, (Edwardsville, IL), Sept. 24, 1942.
9. Tom Parkinson, "Mills Brothers: Team's Auspices Plan Builds Winning Circus," *The Billboard*, August 18, 1951, p. 41 and 67. Also "W. A. King, Jr., Lithographer" *Texas Monthly*, March 1990, p. 166-168.
10. Dates for the Mills purchase vary. William H. Woodcock cited it as being during the 1942-1943 season (Harry M. Simpson. "Burma, a Four-Legged Debutante," *Bandwagon* Vol. 4, July 1956, p. 8-9.) while others date the purchase as 1944 (Elephant Database entry for Burma [Virginia] [http://www.elephant.se/database2.php?elephant\\_id=2315](http://www.elephant.se/database2.php?elephant_id=2315))
11. "Animal Trainer Held for Circus Death of Child," *Chicago Tribune* June 9, 1935, p. 18.
12. *I Loved Rogues* by George "Slim" Lewis and Byron Fish, page 112
13. *The Marion Star* (Marion, OH), April 23, 1946.
14. *Union Bulletin* (Walla Walla, Washington), April 24, 1946.
15. *Lethbridge Herald*, June 4, 1947.
16. *Syracuse Herald American* (Syracuse, NY), Nov. 20, 1949.
17. *The Billboard*, March 12, 1949. *The Billboard*, April 30, 1949, p. 67.
18. *The Billboard*, July 30, 1949, p. 44.
19. *The Billboard*, August 6, 1949, p.56.



Watering the elephants, circa 1952

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



20. *The Billboard*, March 25, 1950, p. 66.
21. RBBB records located at the Circus World Museum Library.
22. *Waukesha Daily Freeman* (Waukesha, WI), March 27, 1950.
23. Leslie Monypenny "Wonder Drug! And Now It's for Elephants," *Chicago Tribune*, May 30, 1950, p. 1.
24. *The Billboard*, May 12, 1951, p. 52.
25. *The Billboard*, April 28, 1951, p. 55. And *The Billboard*, July 14, 1951, p. 97.
26. *The Billboard*, May 19, 1951, p. 55.
27. *The Billboard*, June 2, 1951, page 47.
28. This information was also found in *Sawdust and Spangles*, March 1, 1952.
29. *Hobby - Bandwagon*, Christmas Issue 1951, p. 8.
30. *Newark Advocate* and *American Tribune* (Newark, OH), Dec. 12, 1952.
31. *Meridian Recorder*, July 1, 1953.
32. "Escaped from Circus" *Lubbock Evening Journal*, Monday, October 26, 1953. p. 2.
33. *The Billboard*, August 15, 1953, p.58.
34. *Buffalo Courier Express* (Buffalo, NY), May 20, 1961, p. 7.
35. *The Billboard*, December 29, 1956, p. 44.
36. Correspondence with Buckles Woodcock.
37. Chang Reynolds files, Circus World Museum Research Library
38. *The Kansas City Times*, November 27, 1962.
39. *Circus Review*, Winter edition, 1963, p. 2.
40. *Circus Review*, December 1964, back page.
41. "Like Elephants, Some Customers Have Long Memories, Too," *The Tuscaloosa News*, June 14, 1965, p. 11.
42. *The Chronicle Telegram* (Elyria, OH), May 5, 1966.
43. Correspondence with John Polacsek
44. Correspondence with Buckles Woodcock



A crowd watches as men clean one of the elephants, circa 1952.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



## RAIL AND STEAMER



The Ringling Museum



In January of 1863 Charles Reed married Dan Rice's daughter, Elizabeth (Libbie). That year, the pair performed on the Great National Circus owned by John O'Brien and Mrs. Charles Warner, formerly Mrs. Dan Rice. Charles Reed was listed among the "forty male and female artistes." And "Miss Libbie Rice" was listed as "[appearing] in her favorite acts."<sup>3</sup>

In 1864 Reed performed as a champion rider for Thayer & Noyes, returning to Great National for 1865 and then back to Thayer and Noyes from 1866 to 1868.<sup>4</sup> A New Philadelphia, Ohio newspaper ad, run May 16, 1868 for Thayer & Noyes proclaimed "Charles Reed, retro equestrian and pirouette rider and high leaper." During those years, Reed also made appearances with other circuses. He can be found listed among acts for F. J. Howes in 1865 and 1866 and Seth Howes in 1866.

Returning to the Dan Rice Circus for the 1869 season, Charles Reed had certainly achieved a great level of renowned in only a decade. An advertisement for the 1869 Rock Island, Illinois date of Rice's show described him as

"Most brilliant 'Star' from Centaur's Constellation,  
The first equestrian of this mighty nation.  
Graceful as Paris lightly bounding forth,  
The sole successor of the great Levi North –  
With matchless nerve and skill all feats to dare,  
Leaping from earth to find a home in air:  
Where like a bird, he wheels, and turns and darts,  
Displays the gymnast's most bewildering arts:  
The glossy bare back of this flying steed,  
A rest his nimble feet seem scarce to need."<sup>5</sup>

In 1870 Charles Reed was employed on the Dan Rice Circus as a principal rider for \$100 per week and his wife, Elizabeth, as a manège rider for \$25 per week. A herald for the show lists Charles F. Reed immediately under Rice, describing the rider as

"The most brilliant equestrian ornament of the canopied circle, whose intrepidity, manly grace, astounding feats of dauntless nerve, graceful inspiration, difficult evolutions, aerial elegance and daring novelty, pre-eminently distinguish him as the first rider and leaper of the age. He challenges the combined art-world to present his compeer in lofty and desperate leaps, and defies all emulators."<sup>6</sup>

*Herald for the 1873 Jas. E. Cooke Circus performing in New York*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection


**JAS. E. COOKE'S**  
**CIRCUS!**  
Train Meadow Road, Newtown, L. I.

**NOTICE EXTRAORDINARY**  
**AND SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!**

Mr. JAMES E. COOKE, by request of numerous friends and acquaintances, most respectfully makes known to the inhabitants of NEWTOWN, WINFIELD, FLUSHING, WEST FLUSHING, and their vicinity, that for their amusement he will give

**TWO GRAND AND BRILLIANT**  
**CIRCUS PERFORMANCES!**  
AT THE ABOVE NAMED PLACE, ON  
**Tuesday, December 30th, 1873.**

FOR THE MATINEE ENTERTAINMENTS the Doors will be Open at ONE, and Commence at TWO o'Clock, precise time.  
THE EVENING AMUSEMENTS—Doors Open at Half-Past SIX and begin at Half-Past SEVEN, to a Minute.



THE COMPANY consists of the most Popular and Talented Male and Female EQUESTRIANS, GYMNASTS, ANTIPODEANS, VAULTERS, ACROBATS and CLOWNS, Viz:—

**MR. CHARLES REED,**  
THE CELEBRATED RIDER, in his surprising SOMERSAULT ACT, introducing and performing with his Infant Daughter, the BABY WONDER, 3 Years of Age.

**MRS. JAMES E. COOKE,**  
THE PRE-EMINENT EQUESTRIENNE, will perform on her Flying Steed, DARING and GRACEFUL AERIAL FLIGHTS.

**THE BROTHERS LeCLAIR,**  
SHED and JOHN styled THE OLYMPIC GEMINI, will go through a number of the most dexterous Actions and Drolleries ever witnessed, showing their COMICAL HAT SPRINTING and ludicrous Fustianities.

**MISS VIOLA RIVERS,**  
THE JUVENILE ASPIRANT for EQUESTRIAN FAME, will appear and perform elegant stunts on her beautiful Course.

**MASTER HORACE ROLLAND'S**  
WONDERFUL EQUILIBRIUM FEATS ON PYRAMIDIAN MAGIC BOTTLES.

**MR. and MRS. JAMES E. COOKE,**  
PREMIER CIRCUS ARTISTS will introduce their GRAND DOUBLE ACT OF HORSEMANSHIP, showing in varied Classic Groupings and Beautiful Attitudes, THE NE PLUS ULTRA OF THE RIDING ART.

**WILLIAM ROLLAND,**  
THE COMICAL CLOWN and STILT DANCER will exhibit Daring Manoeuvres and Eccentricities as DADDY LONG LEGS.

**Mr. JAMES E. COOKE,**  
STAR HORSEMAN OF THE PERIOD, will represent in Grand Dramatic Action BANDY the MOUNTAIN SHEPHERD, changing to the HIGHLAND WARRIOR CHIEF.

**Rob Roy McGregor!**  
WONDERFUL ACROBATIC DISPLAYS AND GAMES by the Accomplished Athlete.

**THE BROTHERS LeCLAIR,**  
THE DEXTEROUS BOY RIDER.

**HORACE ROLLAND,**  
Will show pleasing acrobatics in the SCHOOL OF HORSEMANSHIP.

**MR. SHED LeCLAIR,**  
Is MATCHLESS EQUILIBRIUM ON THE FLYING WIRE.  
The various Acts and Scenes will be agreeably relieved by the

Clown and Drole, **WM. ROLLAND,**  
AND  
Buffo Grotesque, **CHAS. H. ADAMS.**  
The Arrangements of the Circle under the able Management of

**Mr. RICHARD RIVERS,**  
Equestrian Director.

**MR. BOWRON,**  
LEADER OF THE BRASS AND STRING BANDS.

The whole will terminate with A LAUGHABLE AND COMIC

**BALLET PANTOMIME**

**Admission, - - - - 50 Cents.**  
CHILDREN, under 10 years of age, - - - - 25 Cents.

NOTICE.—Parties coming in their Carriages are informed that their horses will be taken care of during the performances. The Circus will be brilliantly lighted.

**OBSERVE! the MATINEE is at 2 o'Clock.**  
EVENING PERFORMANCE at Half-past 7.





*May and Blanche Reed as seen in the 1891 Route Book for the Forepaugh show*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Likewise, on the same bill, Mrs. Charles Reed's act was described with detail:

"Mr. Rice's daughter, who largely inherits her father's love for and wonderful control over the horse, will add special interest to each entertainment by giving her public lesson in training, introducing for that purpose the beautiful thoroughbred Lexington mare, Rebecca."

In August of that year, the couple welcomed a daughter, Maryland (May) who would shortly be integrated into her father's performances.

In the decade of the 1870s Reed continued to move rapidly between shows. In 1871 he performed as a somersault rider on the Great Commonwealth Circus and on L. B. Lent's New York Circus where he was proclaimed to

be the best pad rider in the world.<sup>7</sup> In 1872 he joined Stone & Murray's Circus. Murray always closed his performance with the afterpiece "Dick Turpin's Ride to York" involving the death of the mare "Black Bess" at the end of the journey. Jim Cooke, who married Carlotta De Bergh, a splendid rider, was always Dick Turpin. When Jim Cooke left the show, Reed took his place and Murray had him ride in the Dick Turpin act. On this show he was described "without doubt as being the best six horse rider, pirouetteist and somersaultist in the profession for the first time appearing in this constellation."

After being on Montgomery Queen's Circus in early 1873 as a principal and somersault rider, Reed, with his infant daughter, appeared with James E. Cooke's Circus at the end of the year.<sup>8</sup> The year 1874 was spent with Circus Renz in Europe, where his contemporary Charles Fish reported that Reed "[was] quite a favorite. Charley [was] riding a very pretty act in which he [carried] his little girl."<sup>9</sup> In 1875 on the Henry Barnum's Howes Great London, both Charles Reed and "Little May Reed," who would have been only five years old, were listed among the show's riders.<sup>10</sup> The year 1876 found the Reed family on Dan Castello's Great Continental Circus. He had his four horse act and did somersaulting. That same year, the family welcomed a second daughter, Blanche. Later Reed joined James L. Thayer's International Circus at Offenbach Garden in Philadelphia where he was distinguished by his grace and daring. On July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1877 he was in Chicago with P. T. Barnum's Circus. In the third display he did a principal act accompanied by the American jester, Ben Maginley.<sup>11</sup> The next season on the same circus he was featured as the dancing horseman.<sup>12</sup>

Now came a period of eight years when Charles Reed was in Europe with his family. The Reeds spent almost two years with Ciniselli's Circus in St. Petersburg, Russia.<sup>13</sup> There were 100 in the company, including five equestrians and seven equestriennes. Reed was in St. Petersburg in 1881 when Czar Alexander II was killed by a bomb thrown into his carriage as he rode through the streets of the city. Ciniselli generously gave Reed half of his salary when the circus, like all the other amusements, were immediately closed.

Next, the Reeds performed with Schumann's Circus. The family was comprised of Charles, Libbie, May, Blanche and two more – a son, France, born in 1879 and a daughter, Olga, born in 1882. It was reported that the children were all learning to ride and May in particular was "becoming a quite attractive equestrienne."<sup>14</sup> The family would leave for Stockholm on May 1<sup>st</sup> of 1884. Reed said that there were



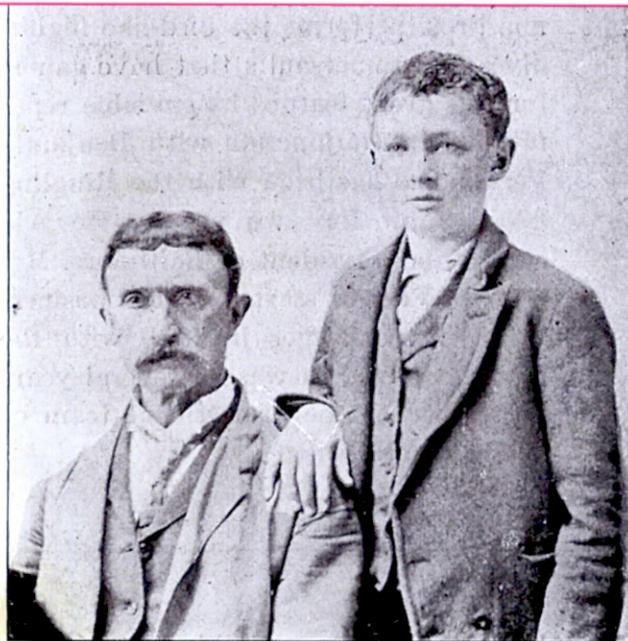
but few riders of any note in Russia. He did not know of a single male bareback rider of any account. There were eleven equestriennes with Schumann's company.

Continuing their tour of the continent, by March 21, 1885 Charles F. Reed and daughters, May and Blanche, were in France with the Cirque Continental.<sup>15</sup> The following February the family was at the Cirque Rancy in Marseilles, France, then with the same title in a performance in Belgium, and by April 28, 1887, Reed was with his daughter, May, in Paris at the Cirque Fernando.<sup>16</sup> In Paris he also rode at the Cirque Franconi, a very fashionable establishment in the Champs Elysees. The building was octagonal in shape and was a model of architecture. He also rode at the Cirque D'Hiver in the poor quarters of the French metropolis, near the Place de la Republique. From Paris he went to Madrid and then to Algiers, where he rode in a very mediocre show, given in a ramshackle wooden building near the Arab quarter, the "Kasbah," where the houses were all painted white or light blue to shed the heat. One "Ouro" failed to meet his obligations and Reed had to resort to the law to obtain the balance due.<sup>17</sup>

By September 19, 1888 Reed was performing with his daughters in Marseilles in a six week engagement. Margaret and May were riding a "pas de deux" act on horseback.<sup>18</sup> In the program was Johnny Watson who had a bear that rode the principal act jumping over banners, through hoops and balloons and finishing standing erect on his hind legs. All of Reed's family was reported to be in good health.

The following year his wife, Elizabeth (Charlotte, Mlle Amelia), died of quick consumption on April 4, 1890. She was traveling from Warsaw, Russia to Konigsberg, Prussia at the time. Much earlier she had appeared on the Commonwealth Circus and on Montgomery Queen Circus.

In 1891 Charles Reed was on the Adam Forepaugh Circus.<sup>19</sup> Although Reed was known to be performing his double carrying feat on the bare backs of two swiftly moving horses with one of his daughters at that time, he is not listed among the program in the Forepaugh Route Book. He was listed as a principal bareback somersault act. His daughters, May and Blanche, also performed as principal bareback riders with Mrs. Willie Marks. Billed as the Reed Sisters, the pair also presented a double trotting act which incorporated their bareback feats. An opening day review stated that "The Reed Sisters made their initial appearance to an American audience in the acts of equestrianism that have made them famous in Europe."<sup>20</sup> Additional advertising for the show provided a background for the talented women:



CHARLES REED AND SON FRANCIS.

*A rare image of Charles Reed, with son France, from the 1892 Ringling Route Book*

*The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection*

"These young ladies – world famed as they are – developed their talents through a long line of professional ancestry and come to their profession therefore with all the grace and adaptability of nature coupled with all the acquirements of polished art.

"At the earliest age they took to horse riding as easily as most children take to walking and having as their tutor their loving father, it is not to be so much wondered at that they are now the riders, par excellence of the circus world. The ambition to excel was their birthright and they do excel.

"Their versatility is wonderful; they do the principal bareback riding act, noted for its speed, its risky leaps, its artistic poses, picturesque attitudes, all so intermingled that the ladies seem to be upheld as much by the air as by their flying horses, which they ride without the least semblance of harness.

"The modest grace with which they perform mark them at once as the artists who dress most beautifully and becomingly, ride divinely and charm completely."





MISS BLANCHE REED.



MISS MAY REED.

*The Reed Sisters were also featured in the 1892 Ringling Route Book.*

*The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection*

The next season, the girls were listed as principal bareback acts on the Ringling Bros. Circus.<sup>21</sup> One of the ads printed for the show announced the Reed Sisters as "Europe's Premiere Equestriennes, secured at the enormous salary of \$800 per week!"<sup>22</sup> The two performed in rings 1 and 3 during the sixth display and again, as a pair, presenting a trotting act in ring 2 during the thirteenth display. Charles Reed was also on the show performing a carrying act with daughter May in the show's final display before the races. Reed's son, Francis, was listed as a trick leaper in that year and performed a balancing act with one of the Rooneys.<sup>23</sup>

The family stayed with Ringling through the 1893 season. May and Blanche were once again principal bareback riders. Fourteen year old France also did a principal riding act. The rare grace and finish of his work reflected the able training given to him by his famous father. Charles served as a ringmaster and also continued presenting his carrying act, performing with France. The pair's presentation was billed as "the most beautiful and difficult carrying act ever seen under canvas."<sup>24</sup> In July of 1893, May married

equestrian Jack Cousins. In 1894 May was with Orrin Bros. Circus in Mexico, which was the last record of her performances found to date.

After the 1893 tour with Ringling ended, the father and son pair performed on Shipp's Winter Circus.<sup>25</sup> On March 26, 1894 Charles Reed and his son left Shipp's Petersburg Winter Circus for Columbus, Ohio to join Sells Bros. Circus.<sup>26</sup> Reed took his stock with him. Charles Reed's circus career in the ring was at an end. January of 1896 found Charles breaking a novel four horse team for the New Great Syndicate Shows out of Denver Colorado. Francis was also at the quarters preparing a new principal riding act.<sup>27</sup> In 1896 he was on the Adam Forepaugh-Sells Bros. Circus as Assistant Superintendent of the Zoological Department of the show and the next year he and Burt Johnson were on the Great Wallace Circus as horse trainers.

For the 1894, with her sister in Mexico and her father and brother touring with Sells Bros., Blanche Reed went out with the Howe & Cushing Circus. That year, Reno McCree, with his brothers Al and John were on the show performing as leapers and acrobats. While no record exists of a





BLANCHE REED.

RENO MCCREE.

*Blanche Reed and Reno McCree with the Great Wallace Show of 1895*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

marriage, in February of 1895, Blanche gave birth to a son, also named Reno McCree.<sup>28</sup>

Blanche and the elder Reno would appear with the Great Wallace show together in 1895. Blanche performed as a principal equestrienne "dancing on bareback" and presented the "beautiful display of High School Manège on the \$10,000 trick horse Sultan."<sup>29</sup> McCree was listed as a bounding jockey. The couple resumed their roles for the 1896 season with Wallace and added a carrying act which they performed together.<sup>30</sup> That season, France Reed was with Wallace, presented as "the youngest somersault rider in America."<sup>31</sup>

In 1897 Blanche's riding was declared "a wonder of horsemanship" by the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star*.<sup>32</sup> She was performing in three displays: bareback, high school manège and a carrying act with McCree. France was still on Wallace and younger sister Olga performed on slack wire and in a carrying act with Oscar Lowande.<sup>33</sup> Even father Charles was with Wallace for that season, listed in the route book among the show's equestrians although he was not listed as part of any specific display.

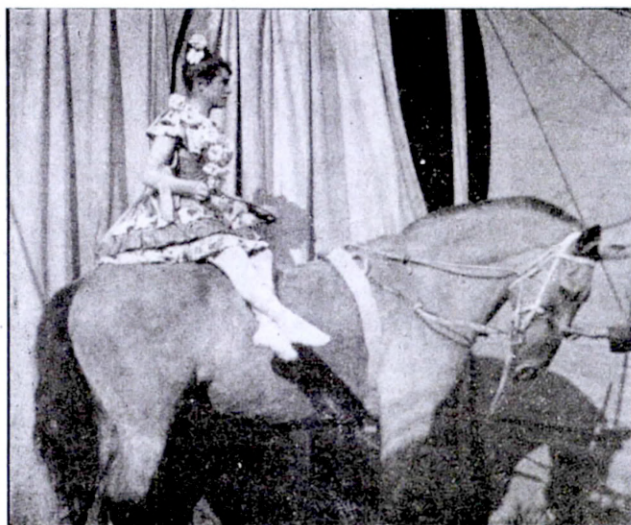
A review of the 1898 Walter L. Main Show described Blanche as "a goddess...bewitchingly arrayed in pink tights and blue sandals" who did "some clever riding."<sup>34</sup>

Blanche married equestrian Herman Griggs in November of 1899.<sup>35</sup> The following year, the Wallace show presented Blanche among their foremost attractions, telling her story in print with the article "Wallace Circus Riders:"

"In point of poise, grace, dash and daring agility her riding simply defies all description. Nothing she does looks difficult nor appears indeed to require effort. She is secure and as much at home in her unstable position on the heaving bounding back of a galloping horse as is a society belle on a ballroom floor.

"Her routine or repertoire of feats and evolutions is so varied that she can completely change her act at every performance for days at a time. In all she does there is naught that is commonplace. She scorns the ordinary and abhors the conventional...."<sup>36</sup>





**BLANCHE REED**  
FINEST LADY RIDER IN THE WORLD

*Blanche Reed on her horse for the Great Wallace Show of 1896*  
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

That same year, 1900, Olga was back with the Wallace show as a principal equestrian performing in one of the rings opposite her sister Blanche.<sup>37</sup>

In February of 1901 Blanche and Herman Griggs welcomed a son, Bernard. Then they were back on the road. In 1902, Blanche was still on the Wallace show, performing with her husband, Herman Griggs, in a bareback act.<sup>38</sup> An article in *The Sedalia Democrat* described how Blanche balanced motherhood with her career: "While she is doing flip flaps from her favorite horse's back or leaping from the ground to the back of the galloping steed...her 'Baby Griggs' is swinging in a cozy corner of the dressing tent."<sup>39</sup> Blanche and Herman Griggs stayed with the Great Wallace through the 1905 season.

Having left the Wallace Show, France Reed was engaged as a principal rider with the Adam Forepaugh-Sells Bros. Circus in 1898.<sup>40</sup> In 1899 at Jersey City, New Jersey on November 29<sup>th</sup> he married Agnes Robinson, the daughter of Gilbert Robinson and the niece of John Robinson.<sup>41</sup> That year he was an equestrian performer on John Robinson's Circus. In 1900 he was back on Adam Forepaugh-Sells Bros. Circus for one season only.<sup>42</sup> Here France performed as a jockey rider as well as a principal rider. In the fourteenth display, France Reed and Reno McCree were in "an original

and unique equestrian display utilizing three horses" and in the seventeenth display France, "America's most expert trick rider," gave an exhibition of somersaulting."<sup>43</sup>

Starting in 1901 for three seasons he was with Walter L. Main Circus. In 1901 he was a principal somersault rider and jockey rider. The next year he did work as a bounding jockey and principal rider. He had a three horse carrying act with his wife, who was also a jockey equestrienne. In 1902, France and his wife Agnes (Elizabeth) welcomed a daughter, Emma Elizabeth.

During 1903 France went over to the Sig Sautelle Shows. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, Mrs. Francis Reed and daughter, Emma, visited France Reed. In 1904 on Sig Sautelle Reed was equestrian director.<sup>44</sup>

The youngest of the Reed family had been slowly making her own name in the business. In 1898 Olga appeared on the John F. Hummel's Show. Next she made her way onto the Ringling show, ten years after her father and sister had first toured with that title. In a program for Ringling Bros. for July 24, 1899 we read: "Display #7 - Coterie of world's most famous equestriennes, Miss Olga Reed, peerless queen of principal equestrianism in dashing finished arenic novelties" and in Display #11 - "Graceful and finished female equestrianism specialties while clad in ball room costume - Miss Olga Reed."<sup>45</sup>

In April of 1902 Miss Olga Reed was a bareback equestrienne in a three horse carrying act on Walter L. Main Circus and France Reed and his wife did a bareback and jockey act on the same show.<sup>46</sup> Olga Reed and the Hilliard Sisters closed with Walter L. Main at Bennettsville, South Carolina on October 23 because the management had to cut out the riding portion of the show in the state of North Carolina. The following year Olga did a good riding presentation on two separate and handsome horses and the Misses Hilliard and Reed did double riding acts of much skill on Walter L. Main Circus.<sup>47</sup> That July, Olga married Nick Howard, a daredevil billed as "Dare Devil Cyclo."<sup>48</sup> In November of 1903 Mrs. Olga Reed Howard announced that she would winter in Europe with her husband, "Nic" Howard, dare devil on Barnum & Bailey in 1903. She planned to ride on Walter L. Main again in 1904. In 1905 Olga was principal rider on the Great Wallace Shows.

The 1906 season saw Blanche, France and Olga reunited on one show. That year, France Reed had taken on the role of equestrian director for Andrew Mackay's European Circus. Blanche and Olga performed together as the Reed Sisters.<sup>49</sup> The following year, 1907, both France and Blanche Reed were with Hargreave's Circus.



From that point, the siblings once again went their separate ways. In early 1909 Blanche wrote to Al Ringling about employment on the Ringling Circus:

Mr. Al Ringling  
701 South Broad Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Dear Sir,

I would like to arrange with you for the coming season for my Principal act – also four Horse act. My Husband clowns and has Pad dog, also can do carrying act – or any other Double act that you want – if you can place us with your show. Please give me an early reply. Wardrobe first class you to furnish all stock

With best wishes to all  
from an old friend  
Blanche Reed  
# 701 South Broad St.

P. S. if you cannot place us both can Work Single.

Baraboo, Wis., Jan. 5. '09

Miss Blanche Reed  
701 So. Broad St.  
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Madam:-

Your letter received. But we had all our riders engaged for the coming season so, of course, could not place you to advantage.

Everything is going fine around here, everything is about the same. Of course, we have a much better Winter Quarters than when you and your folks lived here with us.

Mrs. Al as well as myself, send kind regards

Yours very truly,

Having no chance at a spot on Ringling, Blanche went to Dode Fiske Circus as an equestrienne for 1909. After spending 1910 on the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, Blanche appeared on Sun Bros. in 1911 and 1912.<sup>50</sup> In July of 1911 Blanche was noted as having good success with Sun Bros. Shows in doing a new idea, a principal act which was noticeable for its fine toggery and original exploits. Herman Griggs was also on the show that year. The August 19, 1911 *New York Clipper* described their performances: "Mr. and Mrs. Herman Griggs are presenting their clever riding spe-



BLANCHE REED, Foremost Lady Rider of the World.

*Blanche Reed on the Great Wallace Show, 1897*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

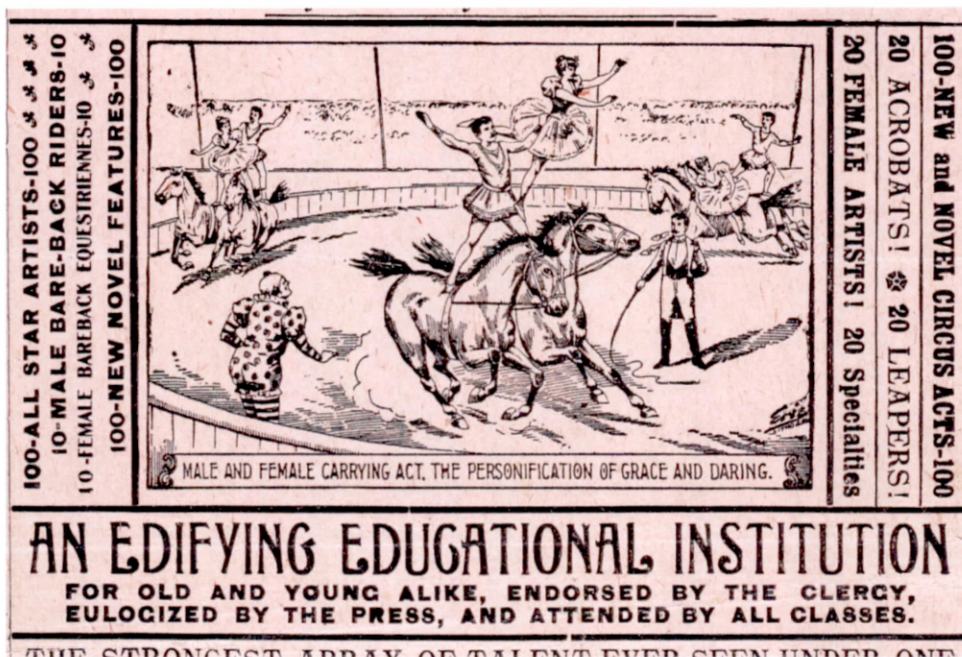
cialties, and are a distinct feature at every performance." In 1912 Mr. & Mrs. Herman Griggs and Mr. & Mrs. Barnett had a number of novel equine specialties including an "aeroplane" horse which was featured.<sup>51</sup> Blanche Reed in the seventh display, was a statuesque and sylph like equestrienne who introduced the latest and most artistic feats of equestrianism. In Display #14, an equestrian carriage act deluxe was presented by Mr. and Mrs. Herman Griggs, which was "most gorgeously costumed and was intermingled with many unusual feats." Display #21 offered a thrilling four-horse climax presented by Herman Griggs, "peer of all horsemen," with a most fitting finale. Herman was the equestrian manager for the show that year.

Although the Griggs were listed among the performers expected to return to the Sun Bros. Show in 1913, evidence shows they moved on.<sup>52</sup> By August of the year, they were seen performing with Howes Great London Circus in St. Johnsbury, Vermont.<sup>53</sup> The pair performed as "The Peerless Griggs" in their unique carriage act and Blanche was also featured as a principal rider.

Next, Blanche was a principal rider on Andrew Downie's LaTena's Circus in 1914 and for the next year on the same show she drove a buggy act with Herman Griggs and was a very good principal equestrian.<sup>54</sup> Herman Griggs and Walter Allen were manège riders. In 1920 Herman Griggs was equestrian director of the Walter L. Main Circus. He was also listed as a performer along with his son, Bernie.

In 1921 Blanche appeared several times on the John Robinson's Circus program. In Display #8 there was a prin-





France Reed and Sister Olga performed with the Walter L. Main show in the early 1900s. This detail from a circa 1903 Main herald shows the type of carrying act they performed.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

principal act displaying color and charm with Blanche and Miss Nettie Dill. Blanche rode manège on the track in Display #11. There was a bareback act and an Indian novelty by Cecil Lowande & Company, starring Herman Griggs, Bernie Griggs, Blanche Reed and Irene Montgomery. Also there was a new comedy riding act with Cecil Lowande, Carl Romig, Bernie Griggs, Herman Griggs, Irene Montgomery and Minnie and Elizabeth Rooney.

Gollmar Bros. Circus in 1922 featured two principal equestriennes, Blanche Reed and Mrs. William De Mott. The Reeds also presented a bareback riding act. John Robinson's Circus had Bernard Griggs & Company's comedy bareback riding act the next year.<sup>55</sup> Rudy Rudynoff also had a bareback riding act on the show. In December, Blanche's son, Bernie Griggs, was in Toledo, Ohio after closing with John Robinson's Circus. He was stopping at Collin Ranch with his brother, Reno McCree, and Hattie McCree and his mother, Blanche Reed Griggs. In 1924 Bernie Griggs was the assistant equestrian director with Bert Rickman on Robbins Bros. Circus.

Blanche was visiting Mrs. Jerry Mugivan at her Forest Park home in 1926. For the next few years through 1929 Blanche worked on costumes in the wardrobe, traveling on the road with the Al G. Barnes Circus. The next year Blanche Reed was living, retired in Venice, California.

In the fall of 1942 Leta Griggs reported that Mrs. Blanche Thornhill, better known as Blanche Reed, was in the General Hospital in Los Angeles and would like to hear from her friends. Almost exactly one year later, in August of 1943, Blanche Thornhill, the mother of Reno McCree, Jr. and Bernard Griggs, passed away.<sup>56</sup>

After her time on the Mackay show, youngest sister, Olga Reed next appeared on the Hagenbeck-Wallace show in 1909 as a rider with the Bedini Troupe. After the season, she joined her husband, Charles "Chic" Bell, on the Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Olga was on Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus from 1911 through 1913.<sup>57</sup> In 1912 the principal riders were Mary Connors, Olga Reed, Lulu Davenport and Rose Meyers. Mary Connors and Olga Reed also appeared with Victor and Madame Bedini on the track with gaited horses. George Connors was the equestrian director. Early in 1913 Olga Reed was divorced from Chic Bell at Peru, Indiana. However, the stipulation was that she could not marry again for a period of two years. This was because she had deserted him. She was with the Riding Connors Troupe and continued on Hagenbeck-Wallace for 1913. She rode in a double equestrian performance, remarkable for matchless grace, rare skill and ease, with Minnie Hodgini and in all gaits in harness with Miss Connors. Chic Bell was with the privilege department.

Flora Bedini, Walter Guice, and Olga Reed were the stellar attractions on Sparks Circus in 1914. Olga was present on John Robinson's Circus in 1915.

After the 1915 season, it is difficult to track Olga's career. In 1925 she married widower Temple Bourke, a watchmaker, in Alameda, California. The pair listed their planned place of residence as Bourke's property in Honolulu, Hawaii.<sup>58</sup> Olga Bourke died in Honolulu in 1970.<sup>59</sup>

Following the 1907 Hargreave's season with his sister, France Reed appeared with William Wallet as principal riders on Gollmar Bros. Circus in 1911.<sup>60</sup> France was also a somersault rider and did a carrying act. On August 9, 1911 France was with Bessie Lane in a featured carrying act. The following year, still on Gollmar Bros., he was a prin-



cipal and somersault rider and did jockey riding with Joe Wright.<sup>61</sup> He also did a tumbling presentation and a novelty fine wire act with Joe La Polla. France was the only one to do the head stand on the wire.

On November 22, 1916 France wrote a letter to Ringling Bros. concerning employment for 1917:

Chicago, Ill.  
Ringling Bros.  
Baraboo, Wisc.

Dear Sir:

I would be more than pleased if possible to arrange with your Show for the Coming season.

I have to offer A Gentleman's Principal Riding Act. I open this act in a full dress suit and strip to tights. I also do a ladies Burlesque Riding Act. The funniest Act of its kind in the business. I carry my own stock, one horse. I also have the best Head balancing Act in the Country. This Act is done on the stage on top of a nickel Plated Lamp Post introducing many new and novel head balancing tricks. I guarantee all of the above acts to be strictly first class in every respect. I have just came back from Australia and would like to arrange with the Circus for the Coming season.

Faithfully yours  
France Reed  
Van Buren Hotel  
Chicago, Ill.

There is no evidence as to whether or not this letter was successful in his receiving the desired employment. In fact, France's career seems to drop off following this correspondence. A 1923 ad for Sparks show mentions trained elephants presented by Francis Reed, but there is no proof that this man is the same as our subject.<sup>62</sup> According to US Consular Records, France Reed, his wife, listed as Elizabeth Robinson, and their daughter Alice were in Sydney, Australia performing between October of 1915 and August of 1916. Ship manifests of the 1920s and 1930s show France traveling to Honolulu to visit his sister Olga, and on to the Philippines, but there is no clear outline of what type of performing he was doing at that time. France Reed died in San Francisco in 1946.<sup>63</sup>

*Blanche Reed would have been among the "Lady Equestrians" on the Great Wallace Show in 1904.*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

1904

1904





MEMORIAL SERVICES GOLLMAR BROS, CIRCUS JUNE 12 1912 AT WAMPETON N.D. PHOTO BY J.A. JOHNSON BRECKEN

*In 1912 France Reed was among the performers on the Gollmar Bros. Circus. The show stopped for a memorial ceremony, remembering two Barnum & Bailey showmen lost in an 1897 lightning storm.*

*The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection*

Remarkably, patriarch, Charles Reed survived to witness much of his children's long performing careers. In 1920 Charles entered the Altenheim Home for men at Burnet Avenue and Elleret Street, Avondale, Cincinnati, Ohio. It was claimed that at the age of 80 he could still do a mid-air somersault. At the time of his death, on October 14, 1934, he was the home's oldest resident. Burial was in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was survived by his children: Mrs. Temple Bourke in Honolulu; Miss Margaret Reed in Czechoslovakia; Mrs. Blanche Thornhill in Venice, California; France Reed in Shanghai, China; and a brother, H. R. Reed, postmaster at Steam Corner, Fountain County, Indiana.<sup>64</sup>

In 1929 in an interview with press agent and circus historian, Townsend Walsh, Charles Reed shared his views on some of the great riders of the past.<sup>65</sup> Unhesitatingly he declared Charles W. Fish the champion:

"Jim Robinson was a sensational rider. He was of stocky build, while Charlie Fish was lithe and wiry. Fish could do anything Robinson could do and a great deal more. Robinson could not execute pirouettes, at which Fish was an adept. There was something uncanny about Fish's riding; he actually seemed more at home on the back of a fast-running horse than on the ground.

"Bob Stickney was a great pad rider. He brought to the circus arena the Greek ideal of physical beauty. Willie Showles was an apprentice

to Jacob Showles, who was not a rider himself but worked on the flying rings. Willie Showles learned to ride almost intuitively. Charles Sherwood was at his best the only "Pete" Jenkins. Charles and Jennie Ewers were excellent riders. I was surprised that the Dockrills descended to working with all kinds of small shows. Omar Kingsley, who rode in skirts under the name of "Ella Zoyara", was what you would call a "stylish" rider. He was an artiste at pirouette work. William Dutton, a friend of mine, was one of the best of riders. He had a sad end. He was held up and robbed, hit over the head and died from the effects.

"The first rider to turn a somersault on the bare back of a running horse was unquestionably John Glenroy. I knew him well. He was 15 or more years my senior but many's the poker game I had with Johnny."

Around the same time as his father's interview, in 1929 at the age of 46 years, France Reed set forth some of his ideas on horse training:

"To train the horse, start with one six or eight years old, 1400 or 1500 pounds in weight, 15 hands high. Riders prefer a mare. They seem stronger across the back. Also the horse should be white or gray in color. The horse will lope around the 42





foot ring in 18 or 20 strides or gallops. Start by riding the horse around the ring in a saddle at a lope. Then he circles as man stands in center with long reins attached. All kinds of noise are made. Riders use cloth pumps (like stocking feet). The three most difficult tricks are the twisting somersault, the double pirouette and the back facing forward somersault.

"He has to somersault and land before the horse runs out from under him. Horses usually don't like the shock of the somersault. A horse much ridden bareback flattens out and the continuous pounding toughens and almost congeals the flesh of his rump.

"To stand on the horse without falling, the secret of balance is standing on the ball of your foot and moving in unison with the steed's movement. When standing on the ball of your foot you can check yourself if you start to go forward or backward. It is easier on the horse, too. Never try to stand still."

It can certainly be said that across their many years of performing, the Reed family of equestrians pursued excellence in their art and certainly, as the above study demonstrates, tried to never stand still. **BW**

*Blanche and husband Herman Griggs performed with The Sun Bros. in 1912 as The Equistric Griggs.*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

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BLANCHE REED,  
Foremost Lady Rider of the World.

A 1901 (left) and 1902 image of Blanche Reed on the Great Wallace Show

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



BLANCHE REED,  
Principal Equestrienne.

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Enlargement of the herald for the The Equistric Griggs

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

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52. *New York Clipper*, February 8, 1913, p. 9.
53. *New York Clipper*, August 23, 1913, p. 23.
54. *New York Clipper*, July 11, 1914, p. 18. And *New York Clipper*, September 4, 1915, p. 32.
55. *New York Clipper*, August 24, 1923, p. 23.
56. *California Death Index, 1940-1997*.
57. *New York Clipper*, April 26, 1912, p. 8. And *New York Clipper*, May 24, 1913, p. 11.
58. *California Marriage Records from Select Counties, 1850-1941*.
59. *US Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014*.
60. Gollmar Bros. *Greatest Shows of America, Souvenir Route Book Season 1911*.
61. Gollmar Bros. *Greatest Shows of America, Souvenir Route Book Season 1912*.
62. *New York Clipper*, June 20, 1923, p. 20.
63. *California Death Index, 1940-1997*.
64. "Aged Trouper Dies," *Kokomo Tribune* (Kokomo, Indiana), October 15, 1934.
65. The Townsend Walsh papers are housed at the New York Public Library, Archives & Manuscripts division.



## Preface

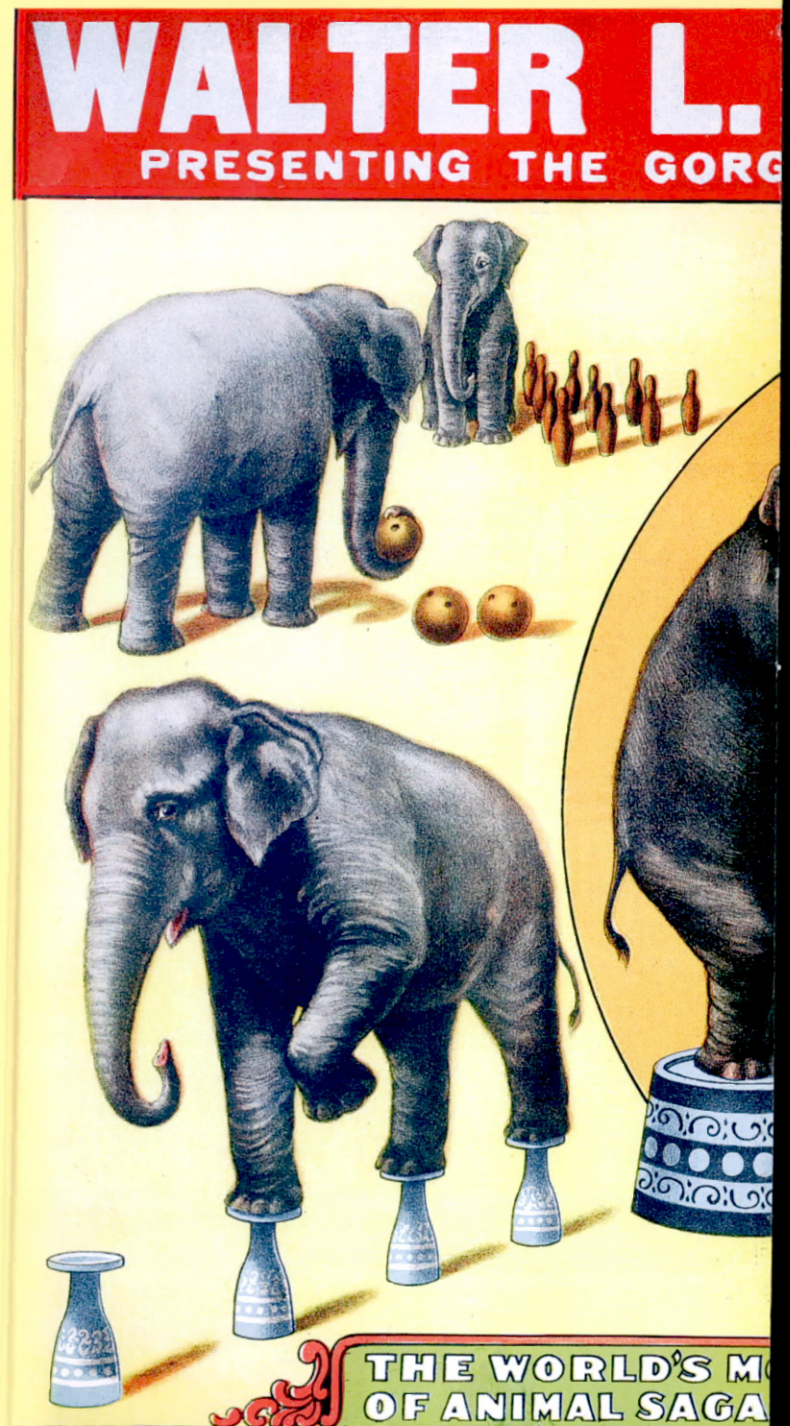
Renowned showman, Walter L. Main (1863-1950) got his start in the business working as the general agent for his father's circus pursuits in the early 1880s. By 1886 Walter Main had a show of his own which grew steadily, moving to rails in 1891. He continued touring a show until a devastating fire in 1906. For years after, Main leased his name to smaller shows, before eventually retiring completely. Main passed away November 29, 1950. His longevity enabled him to witness the organizing of the Circus Historical Society, which acknowledged his heritage by making him an honorary member, number 281. Unfortunately, though meeting any number of then active CHS members, no lasting effort was made to document his long and interesting career as a field showman.

Part of the challenge was Main's personality. Col. William Woodcock, Sr. is reported to have said something like: "I never heard anyone say a bad thing about Charlie Sparks, nor a good thing about Walter L. Main." The man's demeanor came through in his attempt to outwit Missouri horse trader William P. Hall and with those that were part of his later ventures. Yet, his circus earned a good reputation and established tangible goodwill, the Walter L. Main title being leased by other showmen as late as 1939.

In some ways the absence of a Main-composed memoir might be a blessing. In a letter published in *Bandwagon*, May 1950, he claimed that his show was the second largest in 1903, a perspective that won't withstand the slightest scrutiny. Fortunately, Main was a bit more accurate when he submitted a brief memoir for publication in *Greater Show World*. Editor Johnny Kline ran it in the March 14, 1931 issue. There were enough veterans still around the white tops to take Main to task if he told a bovalapus-sized whopper.

A few minor spelling and grammatical changes have been made to the original text, which is transcribed and presented here in its entirety.

*Fred Dahlinger, Jr.*





# My Experience with Elephants

by Walter L. Main

## MAIN 3 RING CIRCUS TRAINED ANIMAL SPECTACULAR "AMERICA"



Although produced by Riverside Printing for a 1936 show that carried his name, this poster demonstrates the importance of performing elephants to the Walter L. Main title.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection





*One of the Main elephants following the wreck of the show's train in 1893 near Tyrone, Pennsylvania*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

In 1883 my father's wagon circus was a 40-horse show. Mr. M. Hilliard owned an 80-horse show, including an elephant, two camels, and ten cages of animals. Hilliard and Main pooled their issues, i.e. they combined the two shows with the exception of the elephant; they were in partnership. Hilliard had purchased the elephant from Burr Robbins for \$5,000, and he furnished the elephant and William Main furnished this writer as general agent, so I was considered the same value as an elephant for the year 1883. The elephant's name was Babe, and walked over the road with this wagon show from Ohio to Texas as the show opened the season April 28 in Orwell, Ashtabula County, Ohio.

In 1885 my father withdrew from the partnership selling out to Hilliard and others and in the fall of '85 the elephant was sold to the Sells Bros. and they in turn sold Babe to Otto Ringling in January 1888 when the Barrett show was auctioned off in Columbus, Ohio.<sup>1</sup> This was Ringling Bros. first elephant, and Louis Sells called on the writer to recommend Babe to Otto, which I did, and was two days getting him to make up his mind to bid on her. In 1888 the first elephant I had with my own Walter L. Main circus was a male owned by Adam Forepaugh. I leased the animal from Adam together with two lions. This was my first menagerie. I can't recall the name of the elephant, but do remember that he ran away a few times, and so in the fall I returned him to Forepaugh's winter quarters in Philadelphia, and the next spring Adam sent me a female elephant, very

kind and gentle, named Jenny. Also returned two lions. I remember the female of the pair the first year had fits, so I wrote Adam to please send me gentle and perfect animals, which he did. Old Jenny we loved, and kept her for years. The pair of lions in '89 were OK. He also leased me a large and small camel. Sells Bros. sold me three cages and accepted my note. I didn't pay Forepaugh any cash in advance or give any bond. I gave him my note for rent payable the first of August, so thanks to Forepaugh and Sells for my start in the business. I kept Forepaugh's animals the season of '89 and '90. Forepaugh died in the spring of 1890, but Cooper and Bailey purchased the show and they let me keep the small menagerie during that year, but for 1891 Jimmy Bailey notified me to buy the animals or ship them home, so I sent Jimmy a check for the entire business. 1891 was my first year on rail. Bailey had a pair of tigers – young ones – that a leopard had chewed the ends of their tails off of, and I remember he sold me those two beautiful Bengals for \$300 for the pair, and I kept them for years and they grew up to be big fine animals. While Bailey demanded cash he sold close, and talked and worked fast. Only made one offer. I purchased the tigers of him in about a minute, and we were always good friends and he gave me many pointers as I visited his circus nearly every year.

In the spring of 1892 I needed another elephant. W. W. Cole had three in Central Park, New York. Tommy, Rajah, and Lizzie. Cole had retired and was anxious to dispose of



In 1893 I had a terrible wreck near Tyrona, Pennsylvania – lost plenty of animals and horses and seven people. Elephant Lizzie came out of the wreck without a scratch, but Jenny's hind leg was injured and she never walked perfectly thereafter, and I sold her to some wandering circus in Chicago, name forgotten – they gave me their note and my good old friend Burr Robbins cashed it. Some used to claim that Burr was hard-boiled, but surely was good to me on this occasion, as the cash came in very handy, in the spring of 1894 when there was almost a panic in the country. On account of injuring Jenny's leg the railroad company purchased for me a small male elephant named Columbia whom I kept for many years, but he went bad before he was with us long and we had plenty of grief with him. He played so many tricks that it would make a book to record it. Never did any particular harm with my aggregation, but was a little too playful. No matter how we tied him he unfastened his chain somehow. In 1897 made my first trip to the Pacific Coast. Joe McMahon died that spring near Wichita, Kansas. His widow rented me two elephants with the privilege of buying. Names forgot-

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

LOT, LAKE FRONT, FOOT OF YONGE STREET

**TORONTO, TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY, JULY 21-22**

Printed at the Ottawa Mammoth Show Printing House, Eight Street, Ottawa, Ontario





*Unloading one of the elephants in 1901*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

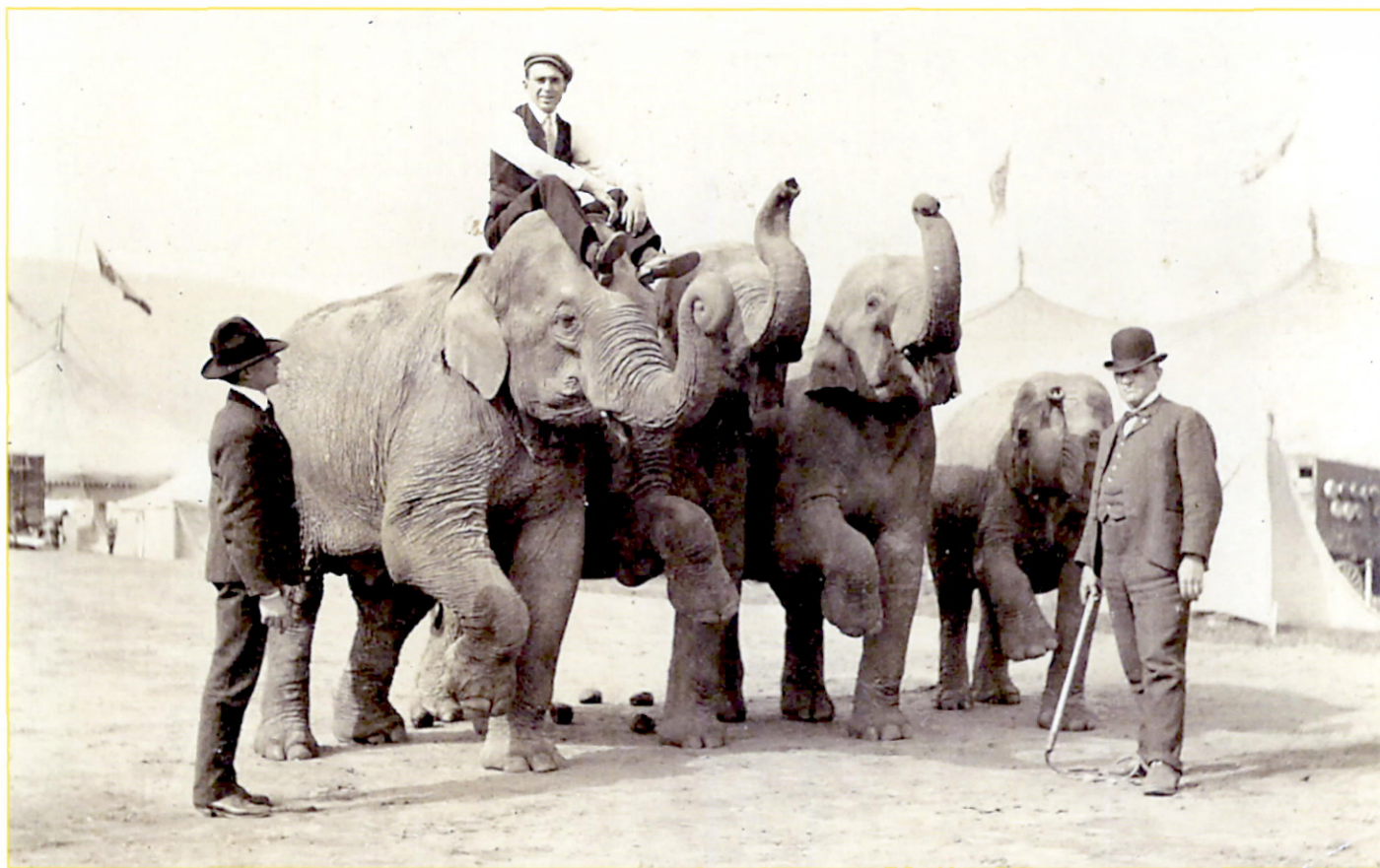
ten. I took them to the coast with me, and passing through Kansas in the fall, I returned them to her, as they were both stupid. Could not teach them to perform or push wagons. We played San Francisco ten days and I was very proud to exhibit my first four elephants.

The three elephants that I had owned, all were good performers and helped move the show on many a muddy lot by pushing the wagons off with their heads. Columbia was the smartest of the bunch. Albert Stadler broke a group of mixed wild animals in 1896 and Columbia worked with them in a steel arena in the center ring. It was the first wild animal act in the center of any circus, in my time.<sup>2</sup> Bailey tried one a few years previous, had it located back by the dressing room where half the people couldn't see it, but he didn't keep it only one or two years. Everyone told me that I couldn't put an arena up in the center – said it would fall down, but we had it built and braced and rehearsed before we ever had animals enter. I kept this act three years and it was a wonderful feature. I have never seen animals since that date do anything that mine did not do. We had the first horseback riding lions ever under a tent in America. In Missouri one fall our panther that jumped through a hoop

of fire jumped too high and went clear over the top of the arena and was gone all day, but finally at night she came back and hunted her cage.

In the fall of '98 I sold this act, Columbia, and a group of six performing horses, or I should say I rented them, to Orrin Bros. Circus of Mexico – for the winter. The night they opened Orrin cabled me asking price to buy the entire outfit. I wired him \$10,000, and in a few hours I received a reply that draft was sent, so that only left me with one elephant. Hagenbeck had three arrive in New York and there was a race between Ben Wallace, the circus owner and myself to see who'd get the three. I had exclusive railway contracts that year on the Southern Pacific Railway and other roads in the west, and I realized it would never do to return to the coast with only one elephant where I'd had four two years previous, so I rushed one of my agents, Isaac V. Strevig, to New York while Wallace's agent had to travel from Peru, Indiana, which took several more hours' time than it did from Geneva, Ohio. Strevig got the elephants and I remember they arrived in Geneva one beautiful Sunday afternoon, and it seemed to me that half the people in the county were there to see them unloaded. I've forgotten





*The Main elephants in 1904*

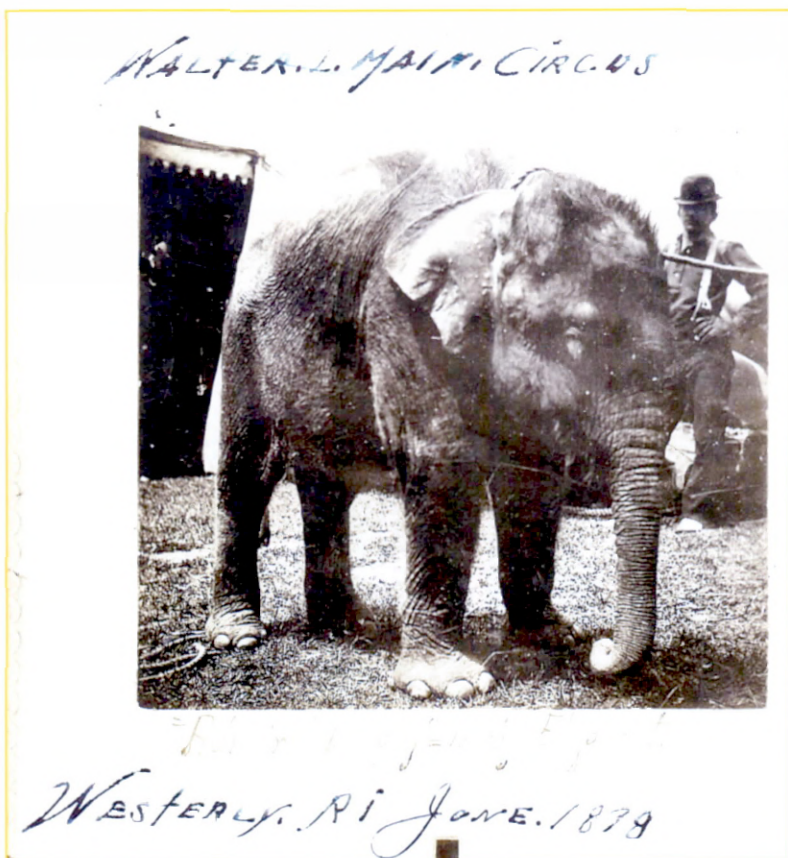
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

the names of two. One male's name was Sport. One would not come out of the car, and we had to put a rope around her and Lizzie the elephant dragged the balky one out. She tried to coax her first, but coaxing would not answer, so we had to use the above methods. This female wouldn't come out of the car – seems she had been shot in one leg when captured, and became stiff on same at times. I sold her to a park in Frisco, and wintered as usual in Geneva, Ohio, and had three swell elephants of my own. In January, 1900 I sold the twenty-four car circus at auctions, or tried to, but we only disposed of sixteen carloads. Frank Bostock purchased old Lizzie for \$2,600, and also Sport for less money. The female that was left I leased to Rhoda Royal's circus, together with eight carloads of show property complete. I spent the summer in Europe, and while there purchased a small female of a dealer by the name of Cross. I shipped this little animal to the Royal circus some place in Virginia. That fall they returned two elephants and eight-car show to me to Geneva, and I purchased a female of Sautelle, giving me three, which was the foundation of the Powers' herd. I put the Main circus back on the road in 1901 using these three small females and the patrons that were used to seeing the

Main show with more and large elephants, criticized plenty, so in the middle of the season I purchased of Hagenbeck in Germany two large females. Now we had five of the swellest lady elephants in the country – all kind, all gentle, and all easy to train. We had a tremendous big year in 1901 and I enlarged the show continuously, till the finish of the season we had two trains. I built my own new winter quarters on a farm one mile west of Geneva that I still own and Dick Jones trained these five elephants to do marvelous work. I had seen all the best troupes of elephants in Europe and recorded all the ideas and submitted them to Jones and he taught these five tricks enough to use up one hour's time if necessary, or they could do two or three separate acts. One was the battle scene, another the bowling alley, and the telephone stunt, barber shop, and many other original tricks never seen in this country. We had a big show that year. We gave the five girls the center ring all to themselves for one act, and it was an ovation. We omitted all the old stale stuff, forming pyramids, lying down, sitting up, etc., and tricks that had been done in shows for generations, but instead every stunt they pulled was new and original.

These five were with the show in 1903 when we car-





Walter L. Main's baby elephant Admiral Dewey in 1898

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

where the manager gave them enough for expenses, so there were never any layoffs for wintering. The first summer I let him keep them away from the circus he sent me \$10,000, so why cry when they die when they had paid for themselves many times over. This troupe should have been known as Walter L. Main elephants, but I wanted to give Powers a chance to build up a name for himself, which he did, and they were known everywhere as Powers' Hippodrome Elephants.

Purchased, in '98 a baby male and named him Admiral Dewey. We had him come from New York in the night to Shamokin, Pennsylvania and advertised extensively that Baby Dewey had been born the night before and that big Lizzie was the mother. This got us plenty of publicity. Then some smart writer in New York City traced the baby, from Singapore, India to Shamokin, Pennsylvania. He got the dope correct and thought he was knocking the story, but it made it all the stronger.

ried thirty-one long cars. Used a spectacle "Savage South Africa" and built the spectacle around these war elephants. That winter one of them dropped dead – no one knew the reason, and in the fall of 1904, W. W. Powers, my treasurer, mentioned placing them in theatres. I couldn't understand it – how they were going to get through the doors and on the stages, but he was such a sincere, honorable gentleman that I told him I would try anything once. He opened with them in Harry Davis' theatre in Pittsburgh, who was a friend of Powers, then I booked them at Keith's in Cleveland and they have been going ever since. They are now in a foreign country, expecting to make a trip around the world. These four were named Baby Lou, Lena, Ada, and Jenny. About five years later the keeper let one catch cold in New York State in zero weather, and she died. That same month they opened the car in Jacksonville, Florida, and another one was dead. Powers in all these years had been a regular fellow, and I never had a contract with him. His word was good as his bond, but after losing two, he drowned his trouble in drink, so I got scared and sold them to him and his wife, or rather I leased them to him with an options to buy. She was a fine business woman and paid for them eventually. Every winter when they couldn't get work elsewhere he sent them to the New York Hippodrome

Then the papers took it up and argued whether the baby was really born with the Main Circus or was shipped in from the jungles. Old Lizzie was not a real good foster mother. She was a little rough with the Admiral; when he'd steal her hay she'd often slap him. That winter some elephant man advised me to have the baby elephant trained. I should have known better, as he was altogether too young, but I let a horse trainer, named Joe Barris, try and teach him to roll barrels and do other tricks, which was a great mistake, as poor little Dewey would cry at times like a baby. Finally he became sick and was ill for weeks and died. We had all the best veterinaries and animal men in this part of Ohio, but they couldn't, save him, and after he died we opened him and found his little ribs broken. Whether he'd been injured in training or whether Lizzie had hit him too hard will never be known.

In 1906 we had the four Powers elephants which I owned at the time, and I purchased another show of Sig. Sautelle in New York State. He had three nice female elephants, and one big male that had the reputation of being a killer. I told Sig to be sure and not ship the big boy to my winter quarters with the rest of the show, but when his train arrived and I opened the car door, low and behold, there was the big murderous elephant in the car with the





PART OF WALTER L. MAIN PARADE IN 1899

*The Main elephants in an 1899 street parade*

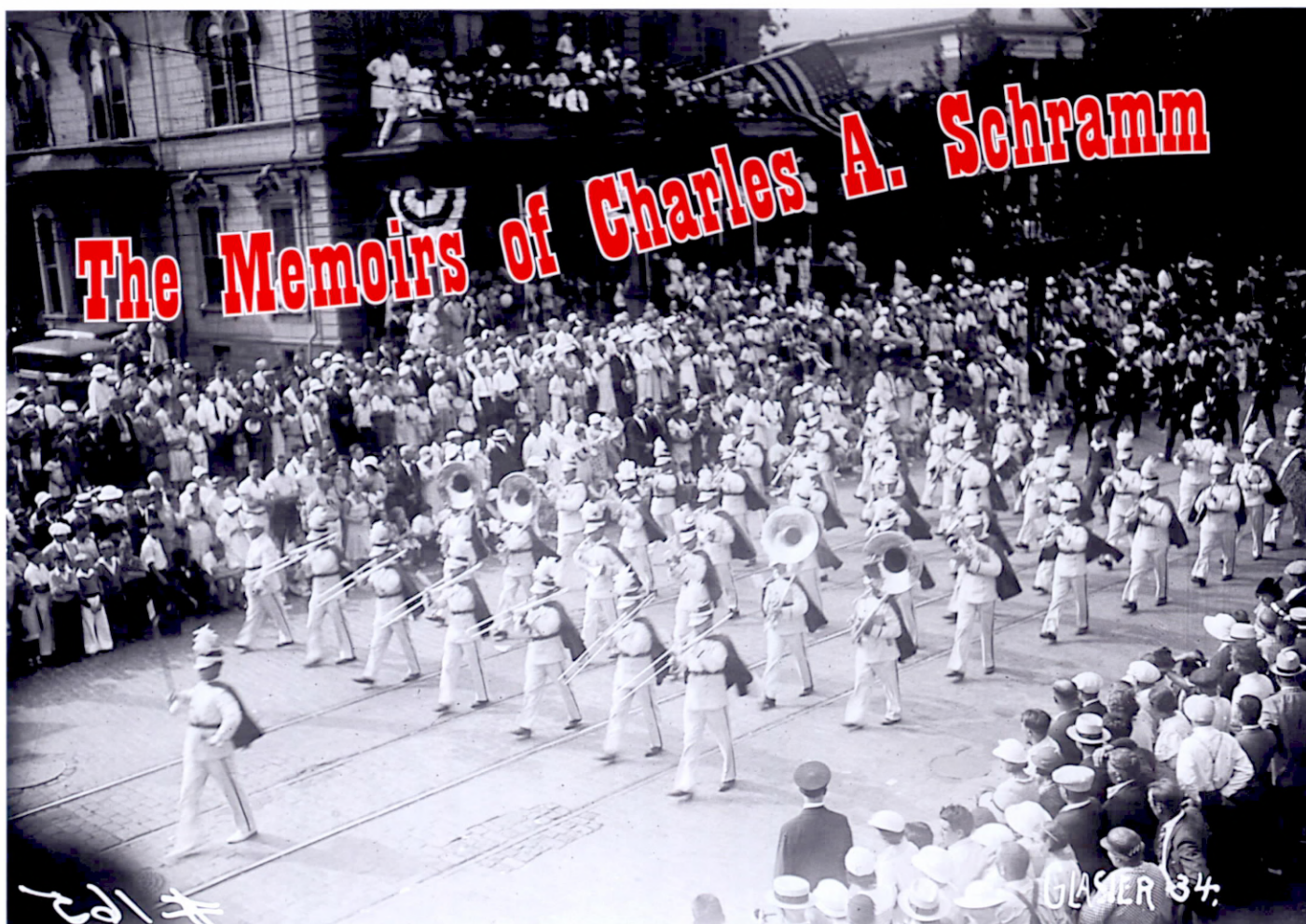
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

other three. I rushed after Sig and Sig says he wouldn't stay behind. He says "he doesn't cost you anything." I said "Sig, I'm much obliged. You ship him away. I don't want to own him," but he didn't, so they housed him with the others and Main owned eight at that time. The men tried to poison the big bird by putting strychnine in his grain, but he must have smelled it, and pushed it to one side. Then several of the so-called brave men got chains made and allowed they would take him out in my woods and shoot him. They got guns and everything ready, then had cold feet and wouldn't finish the job. Then I gave him to the City of Cleveland, but the mayor wouldn't accept him unless I would guarantee to lend him without responsibility to the city at the zoo. I couldn't take that chance, and I sent out hundreds of letters to give him away, and finally a party that had a bird store in Philadelphia accepted the present, and when I saw that giant elephant leaving my winter quarters it was the happiest day of my life. We didn't have any trouble taking him away from the rest of the herd. He walked down the street one mile to the train. **BW**

### Endnotes

1. There were several elephants named "Babe" during this time period. One of the first elephants with the Ringling show, added for the 1888 season was listed as "Babylon" and seems to have been referred to on occasion as "Babe." (Chang Reynolds, "The Ringling Elephants 1888-1967," *Bandwagon*, Sept-Oct 1968, p.3). According to Buckles Woodcocks records, the "Babe that was with Hilliard & Main went to the S. H. Barrett Shows from 1885 to 1887 and then to Sells Bros. from 1888 to 1895. That elephant did not make it to the Ringling herd until 1912.
2. While a difficult claim to substantiate, a cursory overview of pre-1900 programs shows that trained wild animals were not yet regularly featured on the major circuses of the time.





*Brockton Marching Band, 1934*

I was born in Saginaw, Michigan, June 27, 1879. I went to school at Central, then at Second and Lapeer Street, also Emerson and Houghton. At the age of fourteen, I started taking music lessons from my father. He was a music teacher and a wonderful musician. He also gave my other three brothers and later my sister lessons.

My father formed a small band in the family. He played piano in the theatre called the Winter Garden Theatre at the time. In a short time he had our family band so we could play in front of the theatre an hour each week night. He also had a little help with us, as it was too much for us alone at our age. We played this way and he had us play in the roller rink. One group at the Fourth Street rink and one at the Piper Rink at South Saginaw. At times he would get away from his theatre and help us out at the rinks. We would play at the rinks until ten or sometimes eleven o'clock at night.

We did this for two years. We didn't get into any trouble, my father saw to that. He kept us busy with our music lessons. Sometimes we would go skating when the river

iced - would be two and a half feet thick. Also, horse racing on the ice. In the summer we went swimming in the river down by the lumber piles and we'd swim out to the logs that came down the river. My father was very strict with us, he was like a tough sergeant. At times he was very good to us, when we did as he told us, we had to keep up our practice and we did it.

My oldest brother left home and was staying with a family by the name of Jerome. They worked for the Michigan Central Railroad, they ran a target for the railroad. Later he came back home, because he missed the music.

My father wrote his own music, and we played all manuscript music. After playing at the theatre he would come and write a march and the next day we would play it. I still have a set of his band books that he wrote. He was a composer and arranger.

Now, when we were playing at the theatre, sometimes, we would take a truck on Monday mornings and parade in East, West, and South Saginaw. Then in the evenings,





*Al. G. Barnes Circus Band led by Eddie Woeckener, circa 1918*

we would leave the theatre about seven o'clock. The theatre was on Washington Avenue, a few doors from where the Auditorium is now. We would parade on foot on Federal to Janes and Genesee and back Genesee to Washington Avenue, to the theatre. Sometimes in the winter our instruments would freeze. We had some cold winters those days.

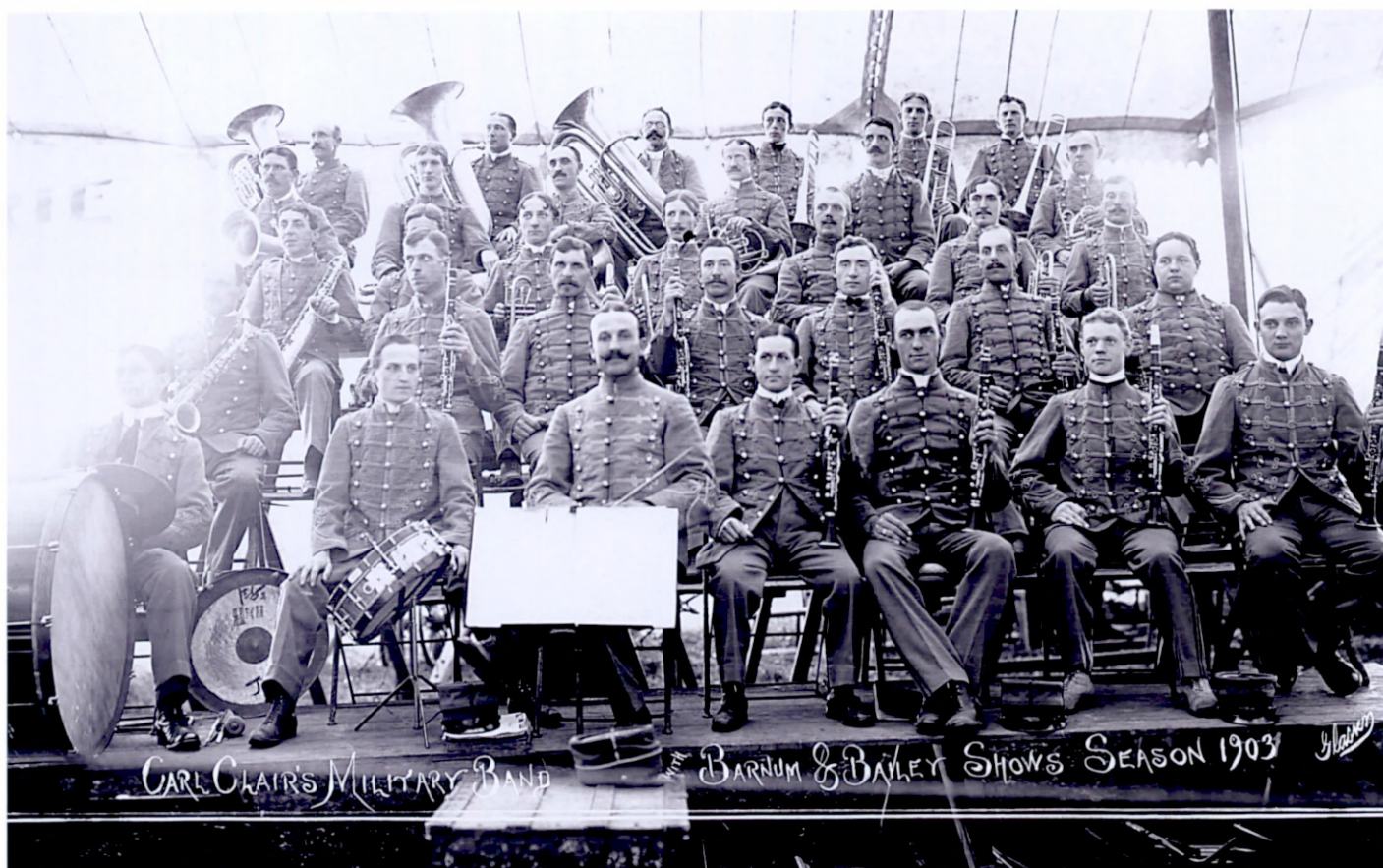
Well, we played around like this for about two years. When my father played at the theatre I would sit in the pit and try to play what I could. I got a lot of experience that way. They had some very good shows come in, such as the London Belles, Saint Jacks, and many others. Some of the best actors like Watson and Jinks, Fanny Brice, Scottie Hall, Rose Monroe, Jimmie Parks and many others. At times the actors only had a piano paid and we had to follow the voice when they sang and that gave me more experience.

One day my father said he didn't like these cold winters and thought he would like to go to Georgia. So he bought a horse and a two seater carriage. Now there were several

German bands going around, so he thought he could do the same. We started out, it was all right and we made it with the German Band. We went to Toledo, Ohio and went through Ohio to Cincinnati. In the meantime we traded the carriage for a wagon with brakes. Going from Cincinnati on the bridge to Newport, Kentucky it was a rush hour and my brother was driving. He drove in the street-car tracks,

**Frederick W. Glasier (1866-1950) was a professional photographer working in Brockton, Massachusetts from the 1890s through the 1930s. His talented eye documented many aspects of the world of circuses and outdoor entertainments of the era. These photographs of show and civic bands were generally commissioned to commemorate the season. Glasier's glass plate negatives are now part of the collection at the John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida.**





Above, Carl G. Clair Military Band on Barnum & Bailey, 1903. Below, Martland's Band in Brockton, MA, circa 1879.





in the middle of the road. Then a car came behind him, so he turned out and in doing so he broke the hind wheel on the wagon. A man hollered at him to stay in the tracks. It was slow going, but we made it into Newport, Kentucky. Then we had to get a wheel. My father got one somewhere and we were on our way again.

We then went to Cold Springs, Kentucky. The Catholic Church was giving a picnic and they wanted us to play for them, so we stayed there over Sunday. Next day, Monday, we started for Alexandria, Kentucky. The hills were quite high and it was hard on one horse. So we parked alongside of a large hill to give the horse a rest. My brother and I had a tent by ourselves and we put it up. Everything was fine until sometime in the night our tent came down on us. We got out and the first thing we saw was a man standing there with one of the spokes from the broken wagon wheel. My father was talking to the man pretty strong, for this man was saying he was going to shoot our horse. I ran and took the horse away although I knew I took a chance, but I knew we had to have a horse so I didn't stop to think. Then I noticed there were three other men standing there, and they finally got this one back in their car. He was quite drunk, no telling what he would do.

We got back to Alexandria that night and we played in a tavern. The next day I got on my "high horse" and told my father that I had enough and I was going back to Saginaw. I was surprised that he listened to me, but he agreed that he had enough also. So we went back to Cold Springs, Kentucky. Then we found out who that man was, that knocked down our tent. He was the sheriff of that county. The sheriff was crazy or drunk most of the time, because he was worried as he had to hang two young men by the name of Wholen and Jackson. They had killed a young girl and carried her head around in a suitcase. They were in jail at the time, and this worked hard on his mind. His name was Joel Plummer, sheriff of that county.<sup>1</sup>

Anyway, we were started back and we made it this time across the bridge all right. When we got into Ohio we traded our horse for a smaller horse. He was much faster and when we were near Toledo, Ohio a man came along with a farm wagon. He wanted to trade us for our smaller horse, as he had two large horses. So we traded, thinking it was a good trade, but next morning when we hitched them they wouldn't start. We found out that he was balky and wouldn't go. Just then a man came along with a nice team and he said we should get into the wagon and he would start them. So we got into the wagon and he took his whip

and got the horse around the ears. He started but we had to stop him. Well, anyway, we got back to Saginaw. We had been gone about ten weeks on that trip.

When we got settled, my father went to a lawyer to see what he could about that sheriff, Joel Plummer. He didn't get very far as it took too much money and my father did not have it, so we dropped it. We settled down again and were quiet for a while. The next spring my father took a job with a small circus at Charlotte, Michigan, it was called the Perrine and Snyder Circus. It was a wagon outfit, wagons pulled by horses. It was a real good circus. I remember Wilt Brien was the head clown and Maud Castello was on the Rings and her sister Maxine worked the Perch act with Wilt Brien and Doc Pike handled the horses and George Miller of Eaton Rapids worked the ponies. It was a good clean circus in those days. There wasn't any paved roads, it was all deep sand and we had to drive nights after the show to make the next town. Sometimes you had to move trees off the road to get through after a storm. Many times some of us would sleep in the band wagon going down the road and sometimes we had to help to push the wagons up hill, but we always got through.

We would play a parade at eleven o'clock and show in the afternoon and night. We played all the small towns, just as they came. We went north as far as Sutton Bay. At Marion, Michigan Mr. Dave Perrine sold to Mr. Ernest Snyder and he took over alone and enjoyed it very much. At the close of the season we came back to Saginaw. Now that we had our go at circus life, we took a job with Mr. Dave Perrine at Eaton Rapids. The next season, Mr. Perrine had his own show, but we didn't stay very long with him. We got another job with the Whitshield Concert Company at Flint, Michigan, it was a large Medicine Show. We played Flint about three weeks. We played concerts at noon on the corner of Kearsley and Beach Street. We were there about three weeks and then we went to Flushing for a week. Then to Owosso, Michigan, we left Owosso and came to Saginaw. This was our last show together.

After a while my oldest brother and I joined the Four Paw Sells Circus [Forepaugh-Sells].<sup>2</sup> This was a large circus, three rings and we had to play under a strange leader. His name was Bill Merrick, and I think most of the circus people knew him. It was hard as we had to read our music at sight and no mistakes allowed. He was a tough band leader, as they were all professional musicians. I was about twenty years at the time, and here is where my experience in the theatre came in handy, as I had about six years of





Above, Martland's Band in Brockton, Massachusetts, circa 1910. Below, Brockton City Band, circa 1905.





experience by now. After this I went to Saginaw, but I didn't like Saginaw anymore, as we didn't play together anymore, as our band had broken up. So I just waited to see what would come up, the circus was in my blood and that is all I wanted to do.

The next season I got myself a job with a Wild West Show, to lead the band. This was my first time to lead a band. I was beginning to call myself a trooper. After this I didn't come back to Saginaw, as I wanted to try other places. Saginaw was a good town to start in, as it has turned out some of the best in the show business. I would like to name a few that came out of Saginaw. There was Jimmie DeValle, the greatest contortionist of all times. And Claude Newell and Shivet, bar performers. The Picard Brothers bar performers, later one of them was a U.S. Federal Judge at Bay City. Also, the Melzeros of Saginaw and many others. They also had to leave Saginaw to make their living. So I thought I would try some places. So I went to South Bend, Indiana. In a short time I got a chance to lead the Woodsman of The World Band. Then I started to play with the Third Regiment Band, the leader was called, Pop Miller and he was one of those tough band leaders, but I seemed to get along with him all right.

I finally got in with a violin player and played dances. I was soon busy playing at the Park and different jobs. But I got the fever to go on the road again, so I joined the Roberts and Taylor Ten Nights in the Barroom Show. Later I joined the Monkey Face, Uncle Tom's Cabin Show. Then went back to South Bend, Indiana and got a job playing in the Indiana Theatre. They had a stock show called the Indiana Stock Company O. B. Theatre. Winneford Greenwood was leading lady and Elmer Bufham leading man, it was a good show. They played such plays as "Old Heidelberg," "Two Orphans - Sign of the Cross." Twice a week I played there for thirty-one weeks. I closed on the Fourth of July, then I joined the Lewis Circus from Lafayette, Indiana. I didn't stay with them very long, and I joined the Vance Dog and Pony Show in Ohio.

This show was about the best that I was ever with so far. It wasn't long before I got to be manager of this show. The manager took over the running of the Show. I had to take charge of hiring employees, and take charge of parades and most of the business. I closed with this show at Wayne, Indiana and went to South Bend. I played in the theatre that winter and in the Spring I joined the Clark Brothers Minstrels at De Quoin, Illinois. I was band leader. We played in Illinois and then Missouri. There was a World's Fair at St.

Louis that year [1904]. I closed with this show at Morley, Missouri and went back to South Bend, Indiana. I stayed at South Bend for a while then went to Elkhart, Indiana. I went to work in the Buecher Band - Instrument Company - testing cornets.

Then I got the fever to go on the road again. So I got me a *Billboard* Theatre Paper and saw an ad for a cornet player.<sup>3</sup> I wrote to them and got the job. It was a boat show. I was never on or even saw a boat show. I joined them at Lacon, Illinois near Peoria. When I first saw the boat I got the surprise of my life. That large white boat standing there. It was a wonderful sight, I didn't know what to make of it. But I was there and had to go through with it. I went down to the boat and there were three young men standing there. I made myself known and one of them said, "The new cornet player," I said "Yes." He said he would show me my state room. I was surprised, as I was used to sleeping in tents. The state room was very nice, everything just like a hotel. When I was in my room I heard a band playing so I went to see and they were practicing on the stage. I went to listen and one of the players ask me to get my horn and set in. So I got my horn and played with them. Everything seemed to go all right, but nobody said anything and when they got through they packed up and nobody said anything to me. Then I spoke to the leader and he said I didn't have to work that night. I could open the next day.

I felt a little better then, although everybody was strange and no one would speak to me. I didn't feel any too good, so I took the show in that night. I got another surprise, the show was very good! The best actors made the show wonderful. Here again my early experience in the theatre came in handy. Next day they fitted me with a uniform and we started out on parade. It was a foot parade. The leader handed me a band book; everything was new to me. I was supposed to know what to do. We went down the street and the drum started up and we were off. When we got in the center of town, we made a circle and they put up stands and put a large sheet of music in front of me, which I had never seen before. This was my trial, to see it I could do it. Then we paraded the town and back to the boat. I didn't know what to think as no one said anything, they all just went their own way. Professional show people are that way, they mind their own business, and then they get along better. It did not make me feel too good. If somebody would say something. So I made up my mind to tag along and wait and see. They would give a concert on the roof, on the boat, at seven o'clock. Then the show would start. I was lucky in





Above, Sparks Circus Band led by Jack Phillips, 1923. Below, Bill Fowler's Cowboy Band with the Miller Bros. Real Wild West 101 Ranch, 1925.





one thing I didn't have to play the show. I would usher the people to their seats.

I ushered the people because they only used one cornet in the orchestra, so I got out of that. I never got into anything like this before, it was all new to me it was professional all the way.

Everybody kept to themselves. I got used to it in time. They showed one town a day and only nights. We went down the Mississippi River, crossed Grand Lake to Atchafalaya River and into the Bayou Tash to the Gulf of Mexico, as far as New Iberia, Louisiana and back to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We closed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, 1907. I asked the manager if he wanted me back next season. He gave me a contract to come back. That was the first time I had spoken to him. I didn't know where or when they would open next season, but I guess he didn't either. They did not say where they would put up for the winter, so I went back to South Bend, Indiana, and stayed there that winter.

It turned out to be a hard winter for most everyone. If you had money in the bank you could not draw over one hundred dollars in a day, it was bad for business. I pulled through all right. Then I got a letter to join the show in Parkersburg, West Virginia, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March. I got there on the 30<sup>th</sup>, I was a little late and he had more acts on that show then he cared for, but he saved a state room for me. There were new members in the band, but they had the same leader. The manager did not know what to do with so many acts, he could not keep them all. So when the show opened, there was a man and woman musical act, by the name of Bingham and Gabriel, that wasn't up to what he wanted. Also a trapeze act called Little Olga. He let them both go, that was some help. He kept the acts like: the Melroy Trio Song and Dance, the Hass Trio Bar Performers, the Dany Sisters Acrobat Dancers and etc. All good acts.

We opened at Parkersburg and up the Monongahela River as far as Morgantown. We had to pass through six locks and the water was high, so high we turned back to Pittsburgh, Pa. on one side and Allegany, Virginia on the other side. The water was so high we had to saw off the Pilot House in order to get under the bridge. We went to the Ohio River, to the Illinois River to Perry, Illinois. Then turned back to Cairo, Illinois, then we hit the Mississippi River. There were several show boats on the River, the *New Sensation*, the *New Era*, and others. Our boat was the *Sunny South*. We made all the towns along the River. The water was getting lower all the time, but we did not pay any at-

tention to it.

There was one thing I didn't mention about the band leader. He was the same one from last season and he drank sometimes and would get very mean. The manager told him if he continued that this season, he would let him go. It happened again and he let him go. So the manager put it up to the band who they wanted for a band leader. They said they wanted me to take the band. The manager said he didn't think I would have the influence over the boys, as they knew me too well. I think that is where he made his mistake, as you will see. He had a new cornet player that season, so he gave him the band. Everything went all right for a while. Then I noticed a change in the order. He seemed to get a swelled head. I knew he never had a band before the way he acted. He seemed to take a dislike to me, I didn't know why. Then I found out. I would play loud on the street and he couldn't play loud. So he got jealous and would shout certain things my way, but not direct to me. I couldn't make it out, but I didn't say anything, as he was the leader. One night we were playing a concert on the roof of the boat and we played an overture, that I had played many times, and he hollered at me and I knew better, but I didn't say anything, just then. He kept it up all through the concert, so when we got through I told him I wouldn't take that even from my father, and if he didn't shut up I would throw him in the river! He said I shouldn't play so loud on the street any more. We came down to the next deck and we both laid down our horns, on two trunks and we were about going to it when some hollered, "Cut it out, as the House is open." That stopped us, otherwise we would have kept at it. The next day he handed me the band book and sort of smiled. I didn't play loud that day as he said I shouldn't. We always made our parade before dinner. After dinner I was going to town and who should I meet, but the manager. He asked me if I was sick today and I said no. He said that we play the live ones....on this show. Here was my chance to tell him the leader didn't want me to play loud, but I didn't say anything. So everything went as usual. I played my old way, as I always did. Everything was the same until we played Caruthersville, Missouri. We played on a Saturday night and we were going to make a 160 mile jump over Sunday to Helena, Arkansas. We started out after the show and sometime in the night, about 25 miles from Memphis, Tennessee, there were two Government Boats on each side of the river to give the channel head way as the river was dry in the center. Our Captain went right through the center and landed on a sandbar!

He couldn't pull away, so he said he would wait until





101 RANCH COW BOY BAND - BILL FOWLER DIRECTOR - 1925

Bill Fowler's Cowboy Band with the Miller Bros. Real Wild West 101 Ranch, above in 1928 and below in 1925





daylight and then when daylight came we were 10 marks in the sand! He couldn't pull it off! We stayed in the middle of the river for five days. Then the manager paid us all our back salary and said the show was closed until we got off the bar. After five days in the middle of the Mississippi River, the manager said if anyone wanted to go to Memphis we could go in with the steamer. So I did the wrong thing, I went to Memphis and took my trunk with me. I intended to leave the show so I did.

I got a room in a hotel and got me a *Billboard* theatrical paper. I saw an ad for a band leader for an Uncle Tom's Cabin Co. I wrote them and told them to answer to South Bend, Indiana. So I had left the boat show and was sorry afterwards, for it was a good job.

I got the job with Uncle Tom's Cabin Co. but needed more musicians. I got in touch with Saginaw, Michigan as the new show was at Sturgis, Michigan, not far from Saginaw. I had not been in Saginaw for six years and hadn't wrote home for so long I didn't know if I could reach any one. I tried to get one of my brothers. I was lucky and got my brother, Fred. He came over to the show and brought another man, a good musician, with him. They played with me one night. The next day my brother said he didn't come over to play in the band, he just came to get me to come home. So I went to Saginaw as I hadn't been home in so long. You see I never liked Saginaw, after I got to see other places. I stayed there for a while for my parents were glad to see me – they had about given me up as I had never wrote home in all these years.

Everything was about the same in Saginaw, and there wasn't much I could do after the kind of experience I had gained. I stayed around for a while, then I got the idea of an act I could work with my wife. She played the cornet, and was a good singer and a toe dancer. And I could play the cornet and the saxophone. I put together an act and called it the DeLeons Comedy Musical Act. I done Dutch and my wife done straight soubrette. We opened and closed with two cornets. My wife did a song and toe dance, I played a cornet and saxophone solo also Dutch Comedy. We had talking between specialties. We went to Toledo, Ohio and I got a chance at the Wade Theatre on Nebraska Avenue. It was a Polish settlement. We had five shows on a Sunday, that was our first theatre job, and we did very good.

Then we played the Mike Shire Theatre and then we felt we could play anywhere. So we went to Detroit to look up some agents. We went to the Scott Booking Agents also

Cooper Agency and Hoey and LaVern Agents. We got a tryout at Scotty Theatre and did good. Our musical part did the trick. We seem to be in demand, as we played steady. We played about everything in Detroit, then went back to Toledo and Mt. Clements. We were busy all winter long and in the spring, I got the fever again to troop. There was some indoor circuses around and I finally landed one. I had to furnish the band and I got some musicians together, about eight pieces. We played Bay City, Flint, Detroit, Battle Creek and etc.

We stayed in Flint for a while, until I landed a park job called the Lake Side Park. I had to furnish a band and orchestra for concert and dance. So I got my band together that I had on the show. We played at the Park for thirteen weeks that season and I got a contract to come back the next season. We played sixteen weeks that season, we stayed in Flint as I liked the town. Then, a man named Mr. Louis Walter ask me if I could teach boys on band instruments. I told him I could. He said he would like to have a boys' band at the Presbyterian Church. So we got some instruments and I started teaching them. I soon had a forty-two piece band together teaching after school. In about two months I had a band that could march on the street. The band got larger and larger, 55 pieces. I taught them all myself. I didn't want any other help, as sometimes it doesn't work out. In around eight months I had them in uniforms and took them to Lansing to play for the Older Boys Convention. We headed the parade and we had to play a contest against the Dowagiac, Michigan Band, also the Reformatory Band from Cold Water, Michigan. I didn't expect to win and we didn't. I just wanted to give the boys a trip and the experience. I had to keep them over night, so I put them in the East Lansing Dormitories. The assistant pastor of the church, Mr. Mires was with me to help look after them, we got them all back safe with no trouble.

In 1916 the Board of Education paid me and the boys paid their own lessons. There was a war on at the time, World War I, and everything was in high gear. Soldiers going to war, speakers coming to town, flag raising, parades and etc. The band played every time, the band was always busy never missed events. We took soldiers to the trains and played for everything, liberty bond speeches, Masonic Temple, City Mission Church doings, we were very busy. Also Red Cross parades. This went on all during the war. The band was the biggest thing that ever hit Flint, at that time.

I remember one meeting was a big event for the boys:





Above, Ringling Bros. Circus Band inside big top, 1911. Below, William A. Merrick Band on Forepaugh-Sells, circa 1903.





that was when President Taft came to speak at the Masonic Temple. The band was called to play for him. Others the Band played for were: Billy Durant of General Motors and Mr. Mountain of A. G. Spark Plug, the Board of Commerce of Saginaw, and of Flint. I had fifty-one boys out that night to play for the greeting of President Taft. He was a wonderful speaker, and at the finish we all shook hands with him and he praised the band. I had the only boys' band in the state, outside of the Reform School Band.

In 1917 the Board of Commerce wanted me to take the band to Bay City, Michigan for the Older Boys Convention of the Y.M.C.A. So we went and we were the leading band there, and we were at the head of the parade and we gave the concert that night.

I kept on teaching the boys and they were getting to be able to play pretty good music. I held them together, never lost a boy. Mr. Mires went on these trips with me as it was too much for me to handle so many boys. They had to be lodged, and fed and looked after. We never had any trouble with the boys. Later Mr. Mires left the church and went to Detroit to the Woodward Avenue Baptist church. He wanted me to come to Detroit and start a band there. I told him I had all I could handle in Flint. I had besides this band, The Mt. Morris Band, the Richfield Center Band, and the Saxophone Band. Playing for all these doings I thought I had enough.

The Pastor of the church said one day that he was going to France to help cheer up the boys over there. So then we had to put up with what we could get for a Pastor. We had several and they were the best, but it was not so good for me as they didn't know my agreement with the church and they would try to take over the band. That didn't go with me and I told them so. They finally got a big shot Pastor and we didn't get along to good, for he didn't care much about bands. I had been here three years and wanted a change anyway.

I went out to the park and had a talk with the manager, Mr. Stuart, to have him put on a band at the park. I was to open Decoration Day afternoon. I left the boys band and opened at the park in the afternoon. Before leaving the boys band, I had a talk with the big shot Pastor and we settled it right there. I didn't like the way it finished but I couldn't take it from someone that didn't know anything about music! I spent three years with the boys band and I will say it wasn't easy. I didn't like to leave, but I was pretty fed up with some big shot, that I consider not for the job, he was trying

to handle. I had a professional band and it was much more pleasant. The pay was much better.

We played seven nights a week and Sunday afternoon. It was a pleasant job. This was in 1920. I forgot to mention, that I stayed with the boys band until after the War was over. I stayed around Flint until 1921, then I joined the Roscoe Wade Carnival in Detroit. I furnished the band. I was with them for awhile. Then I joined the Wade and May Carnival at Battle Creek, Michigan. I closed with them in Toledo, Ohio and spent two weeks in a cottage on Lake Erie then went back to Toledo, then Detroit, then Flint.

I always came back to Flint as I always did better there. The following season, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May I joined the Dan Pilmour Show at Bay City, Michigan. I had a contract to furnish the band for the show. We opened at Bay City and toured Michigan. He had a large show with big acts, some of the Ringling Brothers show acts. But he made the mistake of showing in towns that were too small for his type of show. As his expenses were too high and he couldn't get enough business to pay the help. He started to hold back on salaries. I wanted to quit, but the band boys ask me to stay, so I did, but I was going behind all the time. So I made up my mind to leave there was nothing I could do to get the money he owed me. Eighteen hundred dollars. I tried to sue him after the show closed. He went to Canada!

We went back to Flint and that fall I joined an Indoor Circus in Saginaw at the Auditorium. Played one week, then one week in Bay City for the Grotto Club. Then to Owosso, Lansing, Plymouth, and then I played nine days in Detroit. This was for the Young Men's Catholic Organization Circus, it was a good size circus. Then I played the Police and Firemen's Circus at Lansing. At all of these, I had to furnish the band. Then I went back to Detroit.

Now I remember in 1926 May 4<sup>th</sup>, I joined the Tiger Bills Wild West Show and stayed with them until September 25<sup>th</sup>. Then in 1927, May 6<sup>th</sup> I joined Tiger Bills Wild West again, while touring Wisconsin with this show we played Hebron, Wisconsin, the home of the Holton Band Instrument Company. I thought I would take a look through the factory and going through I met a man that knew me and he called me into the office. They wanted me to stay there and teach bands in the schools. They came over to the, show that night and took me out to dinner and tried to get me to stay but I would not leave the show. So I didn't stay but this was a good job, but I would rather travel on the road. Mr. Charlton was the manager of the company. Then in





*Ringling Bros. Circus Band led by Al Sweet, 1907*



*Ringling Bros. Circus Band led by Al Sweet, 1909*



*Frederick A. Jewell's Band on Barnum & Bailey, 1910*

September 29th, 1927 the Wild West show closed again for the season.

I didn't want to go back to Saginaw or Flint so I went to Pontiac, Michigan to look around. I finally got in with a small local band and they said that the Baptist Church wanted a band. So I went to see the Pastor and he said yes he would like to have one. He told me where the band room was so I got this small band to come over there to practice. I directed them one night and told them I was going to Detroit. I gave them my address. I went to Detroit and in a very short time I got a call from the secretary of the church wanting to know how much I would want to direct the band for the church. We made a deal and I went over to get a band started. All I had was the small band I had sent over to practice there. I had to try and get a good band. It soon got around that the band was being started at the church and I soon had more than I wanted. I started with them and I soon began to see I had to do something as some of them were not good enough players, but they wanted to play. So I had to make an extra night to practice. I told them they could all come on one night and the other night I would select my players. I soon had around thirty-five players selected that I could make a good band out of. In about six weeks I had so they could play Sunday Nights at the tabernacle. In about two months I put them on the WJR radio broadcast. We would play in the tabernacle then go on the air to broadcast. The Band got to be known all over the country, I received letters from all the different churches also others saying how much they liked the class of music we played. Other letters wanted the name of some of the music.

I started teaching on the side and sold band instruments. I was the agent for the Blessing Band Instrument Company of Elkhart, Indiana. I did a nice business there with selling instruments. One day when I came to the band room two ladies were waiting to see me. They wanted to know if I could teach a Fife and Drum Corps. I told them if they would take up bugles I would teach them. So they did and I started to teach them. It took about two months before they could do much, but they worked hard and in a reasonable time they got to



be pretty good. We were in demand and we played about everything that came up. One day Governor Green saw them and heard them play and ask them to play for him at the State Fair in Detroit. So I took them to Detroit and the Governor was there to meet us. He took us to the Grandstand then to a booth and to my surprise, Henry Ford and Governor Green sat in the booth in front of us. This was Henry Ford, Senior. I thought this was a pretty nice thing to be playing for the Governor and Henry Ford. Anyway we had a good day.

We went back to Pontiac. I still had my Tabernacle Band and with both of them and my teaching I was busy. I was in Pontiac for about three years. My last time with the band was when we played a Benefit for the Farmington Orphans School. We played on a boat from Detroit to Budeus Bay, after that I took a vacation.

I went home and then I went to Elkhart, Indiana, to see the Band Instrument Company about my commission for sales I had made during the year. I was to start my band concerts at the Tabernacle the first part of September so I went to Elkhart and several places. In September I came back to the church and when I came in Dr. Savage, the Pastor said "Charles I have a surprise for you." He said "We are going to have hard times." He said I could go on with the band, but I would not get any pupils. He said boys couldn't take lessons and he and his assistant would have to do something or one would have to leave. Mr. Cole, the assistant, did leave. He said he didn't like for me to leave the band, but I did. I went to Saginaw again to see how things would turn out. Then one day I went to see the school commissioner to see if I could put some orchestras into the rural schools. She said I could but the pupils would have to pay their own lessons so I thought I would give it a try.

I went to Frankenmuth School first and spoke to the principal Mr. Zink and then I went into the rooms from 4th to the 6th grade. I talked to the pupils and told them if they didn't have instruments at home I would help them get them. I got 18 pupils at Frankenmuth. Then I did the same thing at Bridgeport and Zilwaukee and other schools. I got six schools a week lined up and done some private teaching at home. Everything came all right for me I had a job again.

The depression came and everything closed up, the shops, even the banks. It was a bad thing, hardly anyone working, but I didn't make much, but I had a job so I got along alright. It was very bad for most people some lost

their homes. Rich people went broke. President started the W.P.A. and put some people back to work doing most anything and that was some help. I still had my classes and they got so they could play for Parent Teacher meetings and Christmas parties etc. I did this teaching for two years or more. I also had a family group called the Dill Family, there was eight in the group. I taught them Sundays. Miss Rose Dill was principle of the Zilwaukee School. I had that group about two years, I was busy and had about all I could take care of.

After three years of this, in the spring time, I got a letter from Tiger Bills Wild West Show to lead their band. So I left everything and went to join them. I had that old fever again to travel. Well, I don't have to tell you that business wasn't very good for the show. People didn't have the money to come to the circus. The manager got back on paying the wages, but I stayed on for a while as I had nothing else to do at the time.

This was in 1936 and the Depression was still on, but I finally got back to Saginaw. I went to see Mrs. Frisch, the School Commissioner and she said it was too late in the season to start anything. She said Mr. Miller of the Board of Education would like to see me. I couldn't see why but I went to his office and he said he was looking for a year for a man like me. I ask him what it was and he said I should do as I was doing in the schools but the Government would pay me. This hit me a little funny, then he said I should see a man named Richards. He told me where to go to find him. Ironically at that moment Mr. Richards came into the office. He ask me a few questions about teaching and etc. Then he said I should go over to the court house and sign up as a music teacher. I was to meet him at the Government building. I didn't understand the deal yet but I didn't have anything else, so I thought I would see it through. Well, I met him and he said I should wait a little while and a lady came out and ask my name and took me into her office. She ask me a lot or questions and then I ask her what I was getting into. She said it was the Recreation Department of the Government. All I had to do was to put so many hours in a week and the Government would pay me. Well, I didn't have anything else so I took it on. It payed 75.00 dollars a month and I could make as much as I could on the side.

Mr. Richards took me to see a few schools and then he said I was on my own, as I knew more about it than he did. Then after that I was my own boss, I had to attend a meeting once a week. I had to plan how to do this, as no one told me anything. I had orchestras in the school before, so





*Sells-Floto Circus Band led by Victor Robbins, 1924*



*Circus drum corps, circa 1915*



*Al. G. Barnes Circus Band, circa 1915*

I thought I would try something else. I thought harmonica would go good as the kids all liked harmonica. It was up to me to do as I pleased, so I went to the Whitehead Music Store and Mrs. Whitehead. She would get me all I wanted. I intended to have large groups. So I started out to see what I could do. I ask the principle in each school if I could talk to the children and I did. At each school I got a good size group as the harmonicas did not cost much, and the lessons were free. To start I had twelve schools, I would teach at noon hour and after school. It went along alright and in some classes I had about eight or nine students, others twenty or twenty-five in a class. Some of these students turned out pretty good and some just fell out. I had some groups that could play for parents and teachers meetings. They played single and together. I had some that could give a good entertainment. I taught them all together first, then in small groups and then single. This was so I could keep an eye on each one to see what they could do. It kept me busy getting harmonicas on hand with several hundred going. It's wonderful to see what you can do with a group of kids if you really try hard enough. After all these years, I will meet some man or woman and they will say Mr. Schramm, I took harmonica lessons from you. I had so many of them.

I had these groups about two and half years, not all the same ones as new ones came in all the time. The Depression was still on as it lasted about ten years and it was a terrible thing. Nobody hardly working, there was no work only the W.P.A. that the President started to help the people. I had a large Reo car all payed for and I would go and get the neighbors' dole, which is food that the Government gave people. I was the only one that was driving a car around here, they couldn't buy gas and I was very fortunate to be able to do so. I had to have a car in my work, teaching so many different schools.

I was teaching at home private pupils not too many, but I was doing pretty good. I didn't see any hard times at all, I was very fortunate I thought. This went on until World War II started and the President stopped the W.P.A. and men went back to work. Then I started trying to organize some





*Sells-Floto Circus Band led by Victor Robbins, 1924*

bands. I got one at Bridgeport and one at Freeland. One at St. Peter & Paul School and one at Frankentrost, Michigan. It took me some time to get them all going, as I had to teach each player separate and then together. I got them in shape to be able to play for outings. The Frankentrost Band played for Sunday Picnics, Decoration Day Parade, and etc. The Bridgeport Band would play street concerts and Sts. Peter & Paul would play for football games. The Freeland Band was just a school band. I done this besides teach for several years. I didn't stay with the Freeland very long they didn't take an interest.

Then one day some musicians in Saginaw wanted me to start a band in Saginaw, and also St. Charles. So I combined the two together and we would play one week in Saginaw and one week at St. Charles. It was more for recreation as the men wanted to play in a band. Then there was a man who asked me if I would come to Flint and start an Eagles Band. I went down to see what I could do. It took a while, about six weeks, and I had a 48 piece band. I stayed with this band one year and they played for picnics and parades. I went to Flint once a week for a year. I finally began to see I was taking on too much and I gave it up. The Eagles Band in Flint did not last long after I left. I started to slow down. I gave it all up except the Frankentrost Band and my private teaching. I kept this up until my 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. Then

my teeth began to bother me, so I gave up playing for a while until I got me a good set of teeth then to my surprise I could play as good as before, but I didn't take it up again. I thought I had had enough. I began to take it easy for the first time in my life. I thought I had done my share.

I know there is many things I didn't put down or write down as it is difficult to remember everything, but this is not bragging just facts. **BW**

Charles A. Schramm, Band Master & Instructor

## Endnotes

1. "They Hang Together" *The InterOcean* (Chicago, IL), March 21, 1897, p. 3 Sheriff Jule Plummer, pulled the lever for the gallows to hang Scott Jackson and Alonzo Walling on March 20, 1897. They two were found guilty in the murder of Pearl Bryan.
2. *The Braathen Band Lists* placed a Schramm as a horn player on Forepaugh Sells in 1899.
3. The March 23, 1907 *New York Clipper* includes an ad "Wanted Quick, For W. R. Markle New Sunny South, Alto, Double Viola or 2d Violin, Other musicians, write. No wires. Address Jack Hoffman. Lykens, PA. until 23 then Parkersburg, W. Va."





*Charles Philip "Chappie" Fox among the wagons at Circus World Museum in the late 1960s*

Circus World Museum

*by Paul Ingrassia*

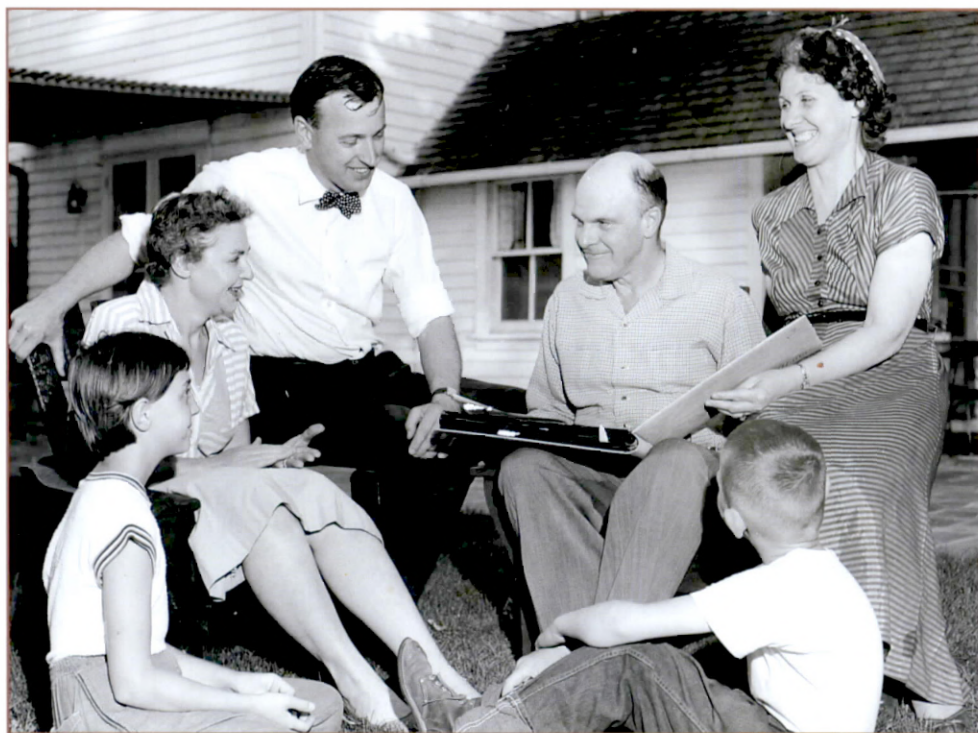
Chappie Fox was, by any standard, a significant and remarkable man. I was fortunate to be a part of his life and he became a giant part of mine. I first met him in 1960. I was twenty-five years old, just out of college and the army and starting work in my family's wholesale concern in Rockford, Illinois. Rockford was one hundred sixty miles south of Baraboo. Chappie was forty-seven and just starting his work and a new life in Baraboo, at Wisconsin's newly blossomed Circus World Museum. I had met John M. Kelly, the former attorney for the Ringling brothers, through an employee with my family's business who was a former Ringling sideshow talker. Kelly introduced me to the soon to be Director of Circus World Museum, Charles Philip "Chappie" Fox. Thus began a friendship which lasted and prospered for the next thirty-five years.

Born May 27, 1913 in Milwaukee, Chappie grew up in a good home with a large devout Catholic family. His father was a physician as was his grandfather. The whole family was aggressive and ambitious. The children were en-

couraged to be inquisitive and to develop insights into the world of which they were a part. Chap quickly came to love and appreciate small animals, especially birds. There was an abundance of bird feeders to keep filled with grains and even a pet hawk that regularly required bits of meat. Horses, especially big draft animals, became another of Chap's passions. One of his first views of these gentle giants was as the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus paraded in Milwaukee. At the time Chappie had no way of knowing that he would shortly thereafter create opportunities for nearly five hundred magnificent draft horses to "strut their stuff" in some of Milwaukee's spectacular circus parades.

Fox's early days in Madison and Milwaukee helped to develop his ongoing fascination with animals, large and small. He became associated, as a volunteer worker, with the Milwaukee Zoo as they assembled a new larger facility. Chappie spent a lot of time photographing wildlife, especially small animals, and later horses, with his box camera. His photos helped fill both the children's books and the circus volumes that he eventually produced. From birds and





Chappie Fox with wife Sophie, daughter Barbara and son Peter visit with William and Babe Woodcock around 1955.

Buckles Blog

other small animals, his interests evolved to include horses. Much of the success of the circus parades was assisted by Chap's extensive knowledge of the animals and the relationships he formed with others who owned horses or were associated with various related organizations.

During the difficult years surrounding the Great Depression, Chappie found work with Prime Manufacturing Company, a manufacturer of railroad equipment and supplies. He stayed with them until they closed in 1959. In 1942 he married Sophie and within a few years, they had daughter Barbara and son Peter.

Chappie had begun writing, first children's books and then books about the circus, publishing *Circus Parades* in 1948. While doing research for *A Ticket to the Circus* in Baraboo, the home of the Ringling brothers, Chap developed a friendship with John M. Kelly who hoped to establish a circus museum in Baraboo.

The early days of Circus World Museum would mark the beginning of the second segment of Chappie's life. This period, easily his most productive and spectacular, began in Baraboo, took him to Florida, and then back to Wisconsin in 1983. During this period he would take the small, fledgling Baraboo museum to new heights of collections, attendance, and support.

Taking his position as the first Director at Circus World Museum in 1960, Chappie's primary challenge was to acquire the many and varied artifacts of the American circus that were spread throughout the country for the museum's growing collections. He began with a few objects and the historic buildings that the Wisconsin Historical Society had obtained. Fox was an aggressive and tenacious collector. By 1972, the one parade wagon "collection" that Circus World Museum owned in 1960 had become three hundred sixty-two wagons, trucks, and tractors. The expanded grounds, 63 acres, located at the site of the old Ringling winter quarters contained 44 structures, many of which were designated as historic winter quarters buildings. Not far

from the museum proper, the historic Ringling Railroad car shops had 55 railroad cars. These railroad cars would soon be used to transport the wagon collection to Milwaukee for modern circus parades. A refurbished brewery building on the Museum's grounds housed additional collections: thousands of lithographs, letterheads, calling cards, correspondence, tickets and much more. Paid admissions, while Fox was the director, were at a record two hundred thousand. The money allowed the small state owned museum to support itself, with the state paying for repairs to the property, all of which had all been deeded to them. During that time Circus World Museum was the leading repository of American circus history.

Any effort to attempt to understand Fox's success during his Circus World Museum days and later must recognize the obvious fact that he was very charismatic. I confess to being captured by his casual and passionate appeals. He obtained the help of circus fans and admirers with ease. A non-believer took slightly longer. When he marked you or your company for a possession or money for the cause, you seem to be inexplicably sucked into becoming a booster, donor and worker. It worked on everyone. Ben Barkin, himself an accomplished huckster, got to work. Bob Parkinson left his established insurance business to share Chap's dream. Marv Gauger, well established as a captain on the





*Circus World Museum grounds as seen in a postcard, circa 1970.*  
Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Oshkosh, Wisconsin fire department, left his job for less money and relocated to Baraboo.

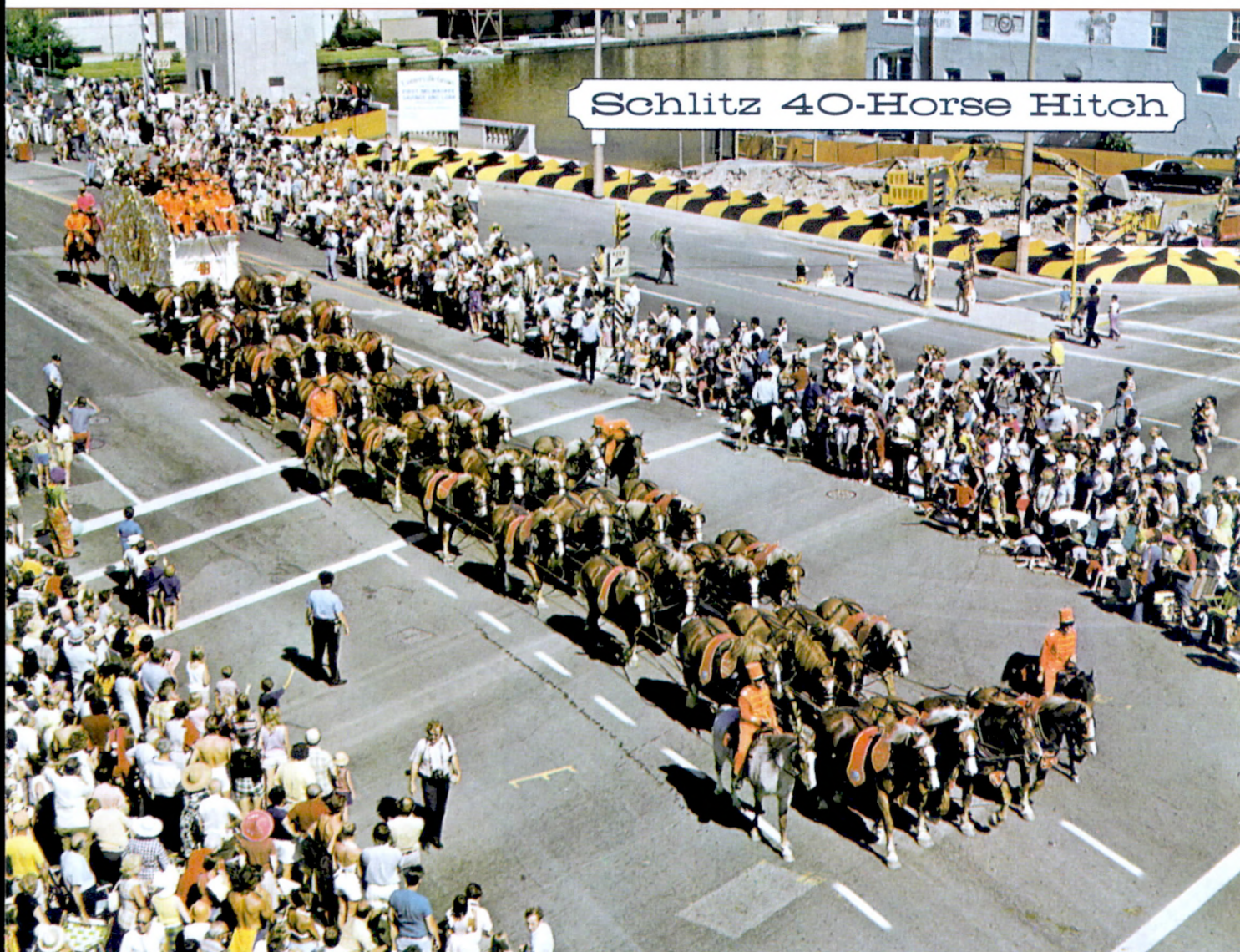
As the Museum collections grew, Chappie set his sights on another challenge – staging a parade to bring life to the Museum's rich collection of circus wagons. With the help of Barkin, Fox was able to secure a sponsorship from Schlitz Brewing Company and the first Milwaukee Circus Parade was held July 4, 1963.

In 1972 Chappie left Circus World Museum for a position at Circus World, a new theme park being developed by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in central Florida. It should be noted that Chap left Baraboo and the museum he loved reluctantly. The state had refused to increase his pay and benefits to any reasonable level. To provide himself and his family with the proper pay, pension and medical benefits, he was forced to resign a post he dearly loved. However he was, if anything, a realist and was soon applying his energies to his new tasks.

As Vice President of Circus World, Chappie's challenges were many and varied, but he was totally committed to the job. The park opened in 1974 and provided an interactive experience allowing visitors to try many of the circus arts and see performers up close. It was sold to the Mattel Corporation and after a brief employment by Mattel, Fox began to work again for Feld as a promotion and public relation manager. He traveled the country promoting various Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey appearances and events. He stayed with Feld until 1983 when he retired and moved back to Baraboo with a full pension and benefits, items he did not have when he started with them.

Chappie's return to Wisconsin in 1983 almost immediately found him embroiled in an increasingly public criticism of the then Director of Circus World Museum. Revenue and attendance had fallen seriously. An attempt to reestablish the Circus Parade in Chicago had ended after two parades amid that city's political turmoil. By that time the Museum had lost many friends, donors, patrons and most of its political influence. Fox, using his numerous friends, old and new, succeeded in affecting the construc-





*The forty-horse-hitch on parade, circa 1975.*

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

tion of a new board. I became its president. Greg Parkinson, son of the long time museum curator, a second generation circus historian and enthusiast, became the new director and began, again with Chap's help, to return the museum to its former stability. Fox successfully appealed to his old friend Ben Barkin to once again help raise the money to return the spectacle to the streets of Milwaukee. Barkin, again falling into Fox's net, agreed and the event returned successfully to Milwaukee's streets in 1984. The feature of the second parade was a forty-horse-hitch, something not seen since 1904. The public loved it.

Chappie, always a well-respected authority on small animals and birds was placed on the Board of Directors of the International Crane Foundation in the Wisconsin Dells.

As a member of the Board of this worldwide organization he worked diligently on its behalf. He also participated in many local and national projects that he had held dear for all of his life. In the last few years of his life, he and Sophie resided in a senior care facility on the outskirts of Baraboo. Even then, in the last days of his life, he would proclaim to visiting friends that he had a couple of "great" ideas for the museum. Like all the projects in his charismatic life, he never gave up! Chappie died in 2003.

Chappie Fox will never be forgotten. The Circus World Museum's C. P. Fox Wagon Restoration Center bears his name. Elsewhere on the grounds there is a plaque honoring his memory. For the twelve years he ran the Circus World Museum and even now for many of us, the name Chappie Fox means Circus World Museum, the Great Circus Parade, and the beautiful hills and wildlife of Wisconsin.





*The Circus World theme park, circa 1980*

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



*Fox among the stars at the 1970 Great Circus Parade. From right: Unidentified, Ernest Borgnine, Lou Jacobs, and Chappie Fox.*

Circus World Museum

## More Memories of Chap...

In the process of creating a biographical profile of Chappie Fox, it occurred to me that there was more to the man than a straight history might tell. Hopefully, a small handful of my more personal memories will reflect my respect, admiration and pleasure with his frequent interaction and assistance. We were close friends for thirty-five years. He came to my house, I went to his. Many things happened. Some might be descriptive of him in a way that the pure data I have provided do not. So for what it's worth, here are a few memories...

...Chap ran the Circus World Museum generally from 1960 through 1972. In that period, the collections at CWM were impressively built. Most of the additions to the collections, including land, historic buildings, wagons, lithos, wardrobe and many other artifacts were donations – given to the Museum without financial compensation. Chappie understood the tax laws regarding “gifting” and played it like a fiddle.

...Chappie always wore a soft fedora. It was often a symbol for him as much as his bow ties. When he and Ben Barkin made a call on television mogul Ted Turner in Atlanta to solicit some of his TV attention for the circus parades, Turner asked Ben, “Does he ever take off that hat?” Ben looked at Chap. Chap smiled at Ben. Ben smiled at Turner and conversation continued. Unsuccessfully!

...Chap had contracted infantile paralysis as a child. While cured, it left him with a withered leg and a limp. He never conceded anything to that difficulty. Never spoke of it and never asked anyone to give him/it any concessions. He loved to dance at parties. The more rigorous the music, the better he obliged it. He was a tough guy.

...As noted, Chap loved birds. His home, outside of Baraboo, was in an af-



fluent country neighborhood. Chap had unfortunately been gifted a dozen guinea hens. They "talked" constantly and wandered for miles around their pen irritating anyone who heard them. The neighbors complained, Chap apologized and promised to contain the birds. He had a smile on his face when he told me the story. In bird lover Fox's mind, birds had priorities. Additionally, he had placed many salt licks about his country property. They successfully attracted numerous deer. The neighbors again complained and Chap promised to chase them away, as they seemed to be eating all the neighbor's landscaping and flower bulbs.

...Fox privately, disliked amateur clowns. We used more than one hundred of them in our parades and they would, despite our frequent instructions, make up their own rules. In the early sixties as one of the first parades was leaving the staging area to enter the route, one of our most beautiful wagons was passing and sitting on the back of it was a particularly obstreperous amateur clown shouting what he thought were funny comments. Fox became enraged and dragged the clown off the back of the wagon, demanding to know who gave him permission to demean that beautiful old wagon. Fortunately the continuing parade required Fox's attention.

...Wilbur Deppe, Sr. was a wealthy Baraboo businessman. He had semis and other trucks, earth moving equipment, tools of all sorts. He also had a large lumberyard and construction company. Chappie quickly charmed Wilbur who became very involved in the museum. He bought all the animals the Herriotts were presenting. He gave constantly to the museum, sometimes money, later land and buildings. When Fox needed a bridge, it was Wilbur who got it done. When a railcar had to be moved without tracks, Wilbur again got it done. His son David continued the gifting when his dad retired due to poor health. Their company did all of the museum's work and shipping. Chap would not permit, even when a price was not good, to move the business. In Mr. Deppe Senior's later days, he had both legs removed and was very sick. Chap would come to the museum and get me and we would pay a visit on his old friend and supporter. The son has maintained the close relationship with the museum.



*Chappie Fox with retired flying trapeze artist Mamie Ward at the World's Fair in 1964*

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...Jean Ringling was the great granddaughter of Henry Ringling. She lived in the family's old ancestral mansion in Baraboo. Henry had owned the Al. Ringling Theatre. Jean Ringling was a good friend to the museum but required lots of attention. Fox gave it to her, frequently inviting her to dinner at his home and to ride in a prominent position in the circus parades. She would call me before the parade and ask, "What provision has been made for my transport to Milwaukee?" "What arrangements have been made for my housing and meals?" She announced, "I will not wear anything that is not 'proper' for me." I went nuts! Fox just smiled.

...Chap's wife Sophie was a truly great lady. I suspect being Mrs. Fox required lots of patience. Chap did not do well with money matters and Sophie handled all the household funds. If he complained she immediately offered to let him deal with the money. His move from CWM to Ringling seemed to have her support. She loved Wisconsin but recognized the need for better wages, pension and medical benefits, all items they did not have working for the state. Thus Chap left a job he loved more than any he would ever have. Once I made the mistake of giving Sophie what I thought was a good stock tip. It of course went sour. When I saw her next she said, "Nice job big mouth!"

...There was much more. **BW**



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